sleeping civilians and Korean Marines, even a couple of Americal patrols, but hardly any Viet Cong."[55]

Nevertheless, Koster clung to the plan to keep the enemy moving, taking casualties, and running out of supplies and recruits. It worked for a time, but the grittiness of the area and the growing hatred of the locals led the Americal Division in six months' time to a place called My Lai, where their plans would spectacularly unravel, along with the American war effort.[56]

In some corner of his brain, Westmoreland must have seen it all coming. On a flight during that summer of 1967, the general found himself seated next to journalist Neil Sheehan. Sheehan asked about the agony of the Vietnamese people and its impact on the war. "Aren't you bothered by all of the civilians killed by shelling and bombing?" Sheehan asked the general. "Yes," Westmoreland replied, casually adding: "But it does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn't it?" Westy, in other words, knew exactly what he was doing but felt certain that amid the slaughter and destruction, he was drying up the sea in which the VC swam and reaching the "crossover point"—the point at which he would be killing more enemy troops than the communist recruiters could replace. Westmoreland could only hope that one final push might break Hanoi's will to go on before his own casualties and dearth of results broke LBJ's confidence in him. But the general was running out of time.[57]

Chapter 11

ZENITH OF FATUITY

Khe Sanh and Con Thien were just two American backwaters attacked by Hanoi in late 1967 to lure the Americans away from the population centers. In the 31,000 rugged, empty square miles of II Corps, there was another: Dak To, a lonely Special Forces compound in the Central Highlands.

Westmoreland fixated on four regiments of the NVA 1st Division, which were believed to be moving through the mountains and gathering for an overwhelming attack on Dak To. With Giap departing for his "self-exile" in Budapest, General Van Tien Dung was resuming the attacks that had triggered the Hawthorne, Paul Revere, Sam Houston, Francis Marion, and Greeley operations of 1966–1967. In those earlier battles, the NVA had waged small "bait and lure" operations, to draw free-world forces into the jungle-clad mountains and kill them in their small patrol units. Westmoreland had taken the bait each time, intoning his obtuse mantra: "If we avoided battle, we would never succeed." It had become an article of faith for Westy that you *had* to fight in the Central Highlands and along the entire length of the DMZ to prevent "the enemy pushing his base areas closer to the centers of population."[1]

With Vice President Hubert Humphrey arriving in Saigon to attend President Thieu's inauguration at the end of October 1967, Le Duan and his entourage now played for bigger stakes. LBJ and Humphrey were

Protesters march on the Pentagon in October 1967 during the first great national demonstration against the Vietnam War. (LBJ Library)

looking increasingly vulnerable at home. More than half of Americans polled in 1967 declared that the draft was "unfair." Muhammad Ali had refused induction in April—"I ain't got no quarrel with those Viet Cong"—and had been barred from boxing and convicted of draft evasion in June. The first mass protest against the war occurred in October 1967, on the eve of Dak To, when 100,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial and a third of them marched on to the Pentagon, where 682 were arrested.[2]

Campus protest had become a feature of the Vietnam War because of the dramatic way American society had changed over the past decade. The population had grown 7 percent but college enrollment had surged 102 percent, not least because college and grad students were exempt from military service until 1967, when the Johnson administration began dismantling the automatic student deferment. This naturally stimulated campus resistance to the war.[3]

With the baby boom and the affluent society intersecting, college campuses were radicalized by the 300,000 draft calls in 1967. For the first time, college students would have to submit to a standardized "college qualification test" and score in the highest percentiles to avoid the draft and continue in college. Grad students would lose their deferments after a single year of study. By 1967, most students considered the war a gross misuse of American power. "They can't understand why we are using our air power against a primitive people that has no air power," George Ball explained to the president.[4]

Dak To, established to monitor the infiltration routes through the 6,000-foot peaks that ran along the Laotian and Cambodian borders, unexpectedly became one of the biggest battles of the war. Westmoreland was in Washington briefing President Johnson on what the general was grandly calling his "Year of Progress" when the threat to Dak To emerged.

American signals intelligence detected the installation of new NVA forward command posts and their direct radio communication with Hanoi—always a tip-off of impending offensives. The five regiments of the NVA 1st Division appeared to be devising a three-pronged attack on Dak To.

General Creighton Abrams, who had left Washington in May to take up his new role as Westmoreland's deputy, found himself acting commander during Westy's political trip to Washington. Abrams rushed the US 4th Infantry Division and 173rd Airborne Brigade into action. Twelve thousand trucks were put on the road from the American bases at Kontum City and Pleiku to supply Dak To with a mountain of ammunition, fuel, and food. Thwarted by Abrams' rapid reinforcement of Dak To, the NVA changed their plan. Instead of overrunning Dak To, they took up defensive positions in the hills south and southwest of it, trained their mortars and rockets on the Dak To combat base and airstrip, and dared the Americans to climb into those mountains to root them out.[5]

The carnage inside Dak To mounted as the NVA artillery pounded the base, hitting C-130s on the ground and blowing up tons of ammunition and fuel. With the stealthy NVA infantry and artillery springing ambushes on American patrols and dug in on the peaks around Dak To, Abrams ordered them driven out in a big op he named MacArthur. The conditions for Operation MacArthur around Dak To were appalling—"the endless rain seemed to beat against the place, driving it, and everyone in it, deeper into the depressing goo," Private John Ketwig wrote. Ketwig described the mood inside Dak To during the long battle: "Thousands of guys like myself, torn away from home and family, crouched in the mud, wishing they weren't here." They'd have ample opportunity to complain and make those complaints heard, for Dak To drew a crowd of network TV crews and reporters, including emerging stars such as Peter Arnett, Edwin White, Dana Stone, and Hugh Greenway.[6]

In the hills overlooking Dak To, the NVA took full advantage of the favorable terrain: caves, cliffs, dense jungle, triple-canopy vegetation,

streams and rivers, foot trails, and only one hard-surface road to serve the American guns. A battalion of the US 4th ID took Hill 1338, south of Dak To, while two ARVN battalions cleared Hill 1416, northeast of the place. With American strength surging in the area and the arrival of the B-52s, which pounded the enemy-held peaks, the North Vietnamese began a retreat to their sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. They clung to key heights on the way back, most notoriously Hill 875, southwest of Dak To.[7]

The fighting there, in the week before Thanksgiving, was vicious. "As far as brutal fighting goes," General William Peers told journalists, "I would say that this is the worst that we've had." Two battalions of the NVA 174th Regiment were in camouflaged, bunkered positions, their faces blackened, their weapons wrapped in burlap. Early on November 19, three companies of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, about 330 men, climbed the north slope of Hill 875, intending to push the enemy out of their positions and off the hill. "The Herd," as the 173rd were known, had suffered 79 killed and 287 wounded just reaching the mount against NVA rearguards. They now met even fiercer resistance. Companies C and D of the 2nd Battalion of the 503rd Regiment went first, followed by Company A, which waited in reserve and busied itself hacking an LZ out of the jungle.[8]

The assault formation, "two up and one back," the reverse wedge formation preferred by American commanders for fifty years, immediately broke down in the rough, wooded terrain. The paratroopers, struggling to stay on line, were continually surrounded and mortared by aggressive, stealthy enemy infantry, who sheared off squads, platoons, and command groups, then slid a force in between the two forward companies and the reserve company behind to prevent them from combining. "Jesus, they were all over the place," one of the grunts recalled. "The noncoms kept shouting 'get up the hill, get up the goddamn hill,' but we couldn't; we were surrounded, and we were firing in all directions."[9]

Alpha Company ended up having to "escape forward" to join Charlie and Delta Companies on the slope, its envelopment narrowly averted by the heroics of Pfc. Carlos Lozada, a twenty-year-old Puerto Rican, who walked backward up the hill firing his M-60 machine gun long enough for the company to slip out of the trap, a feat for which Lozada received an NVA bullet in the head and a posthumous Medal of Honor. Helicopters sent to resupply the American troops with pallets of ammo, food, and water were driven off by enemy ground fire. Six slicks went down in flames. NVA infantry, hidden in tunnels, camouflaged in trees, and firing from invisible, defiladed positions, yelled *"Chieu hoi!"*—"Open arms!"—to mock the Americans, who crouched in frightened, disoriented groups on the hillside.

An air strike sent to relieve the battered 2nd Battalion as night fell on November 19 went terribly wrong and pointed to the growing difficulty of bombing safely in Vietnam, where the bombs were still "dumb" and unguided and the opposing forces were so close together that the danger of a "short round"—ordnance falling on friendly forces instead of the enemy—had become a fact of life. "Air Force bombs are very, very accurate," grunts joked. "They hit the ground."

In this particular case, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Taber, a Marine pilot who had flown ninety hours in combat, was directed by his FAC, an Air Force captain orbiting the battlefield in a Cessna, to drop his bombs

"Air Force bombs are very, very accurate," grunts joked. "They hit the ground." Friendly fire deaths were a constant menace. Here an F-100 drops its bombs into jungle canopy. (National Archives)

on a napalm fire that Air Force jets had just ignited along the enemy trench lines. Taber, swooping in at 500 miles per hour, released his two Snake Eye Mark 81 bombs. They landed 220 yards short. The bombs, each filled with 100 pounds of TNT and aluminum powder, the latter added to increase the heat and blast of the bomb, tumbled onto the very spot where the command group and first aid station for two of the American companies trapped on the hillside were sheltered. One of Taber's bombs failed to explode; the other glanced off a tree and burst on top of the Americans.[10]

The Mark 81 bomb, the lightest bomb in the Air Force arsenal and heavily used in Vietnam to mitigate the chances of "fratricide," tore through the grunts on the ground. One company commander was killed, the other severely wounded. Forty-one others were killed, and forty-four were wounded by the blast. An Air Force pilot passing over the scene immediately detected the error: "Oops," he blurted into his microphone, "we just got friendlies."[11]

At the point of impact, Specialist Jon Wambi Cook, who had been shielded by a tree trunk, heard moaning and crying, crawled to the edge of the smoking crater, and peered inside. The carnage was dimly lit by flares drifting over the battlefield. "All you saw was parts and pieces." Cook recognized the face of a friend. "Hey," the face called, "can you come and get me?" Cook squinted into the darkness: "I could see that he'd been cut off below the thighs; there was nothing there."[12]

With the 2nd Battalion of the 503rd Infantry Regiment pinned down on the north slope of Hill 875 and kept alive only by a steady application of artillery and air strikes, the three companies of the regiment's 4th Battalion flew into a firebase north of the hill on November 20 and then moved overland in diamond formations—one platoon in the lead, one on each of the flanks, and one in the rear—to rescue the 2nd Battalion, which had crammed inside a narrow perimeter, barely 100 yards wide and 100 yards deep. The besieged battalion was under constant fire, was running out of everything, and could not even evacuate its wounded because LZs could not be cut and medevacs could not approach through intense enemy antiaircraft fire, much of it from captured American M-60 machine guns.

The communists were so close to the perimeter that the Americans inside could hear the almost instantaneous cough and impact of the enemy mortars—five-round volleys either focused on targets or walked through the position in a searching pattern that, given the crowding, always hit something.

Casualties piled up in the packed square. Direct hits on holes crowded with grunts would kill or wound half a dozen men at a time. The three companies of the 4th Battalion marched all day through scrub and thick bamboo on November 20 to reach the 2nd Battalion. They passed through several abandoned NVA base camps, and knew they were close when they arrived at a 2nd Battalion observation post, occupied by a single paratrooper, lying dead on his side in a pile of empty shell casings, still clutching his jammed machine gun. After that, they passed so many dead paratroopers of the 2nd Battalion that one grunt asked aloud if there could be any friendlies left alive. Sweeping into the perimeter, they found the survivors of the 2nd Battalion spent, many of them with tears in their eyes.

All night long the enemy artillery raked the reinforced perimeter. Reporter Peter Arnett, who was there, noted that "the living and the dead had the same gray pallor on Hill 875." The casualties mounted: "Men joking with you and offering cigarettes writhed on the ground wounded and pleading for water minutes later." Instead of withdrawing, the Americans resumed the attack on November 21.

One thousand helicopters arrived overhead to drop in LAWs (the latest version of the bazooka), flamethrowers, mortars, and ammo. The paratroopers of the 4th Battalion were given hasty instruction in the use of flamethrowers and LAWs. They then formed up to watch five air strikes on the hill above them—ten F-100s and a pair of F-4C Phantoms shuttling in to drop 15 tons of high explosive and 7.5 tons of napalm on the summit of Hill 875. The enemy bunkers and tunnels withstood it all. They would shiver, quake, burn, and then resume firing. "We've tried 750 pounders, napalm and everything else, but air can't do it," a despairing platoon leader said to Peter Arnett. "It's going to take manpower to get those positions."[13]

The sky soldiers attacked at three in the afternoon, moving out of the shell-gouged perimeter and into the tangle of blown-down trees around it. The air strikes seemed to have accomplished nothing. The fire from above was as intense as ever. The paratroopers lost another 19 killed and 108 wounded trying to move up the hill.

The grunts looked anxiously for targets for their LAWs and flamethrowers and found none. The NVA on the slopes were hidden in bunkers

that were almost flush to the ground, and they were firing from six-inch slits covered with leaves and branches. While the M-60 machine gunners stood erect to spray the trees around them in a desperate bid to suppress the snipers nested there, thirty-four-year-old Master Sergeant William Carey hustled forward with satchel charges to fling at the bunkers. He was hit by a mortar round, which disintegrated him, his satchel charges, and the men around him.

The 4th Battalion's Bravo Company suffered devastating casualties—all of its platoons mauled. The survivors retreated 100 yards, some muttering an altered "Battle Hymn of the Republic": "Gory Gory What a Hell-of-a-Way to Die." They sat down to allow the Air Force and the artillery to resume pounding the hill. All day and night on November 22 the medium and heavy artillery fired at maximum rates, and air strikes came in every fifteen to thirty minutes.[14]

The next morning, Thanksgiving Day, the 4th Battalion attacked again up the north slope, this time with help from two companies of the 1st Battalion of the 12th Regiment, which advanced up the south slope—a tactical precaution that Peers should have taken days earlier. They were preceded by another storm of American artillery—10,000 rounds—and a final massive air strike: four tons of high explosive and three tons of napalm in forty-five minutes. Then the two battalions attacked, crying "Airborne!" and "Geronimo!" as they neared the bald, burned, cratered summit.

This time the Americans took the hill in just twenty-five minutes. The enemy had left. Some of the paratroopers wept with relief and pride as they examined the captured fortifications: a trench system deep enough for the NVA infantry to walk upright, six feet of overhead cover to protect against shrapnel and high explosive, and caves dug into the back of the trenches so that dead or wounded men could be shoved out of the way. The grunts ate C-ration turkey loaf until helicopters arrived with a hot Thanksgiving meal, which they devoured sitting in the dust atop Hill 875. "It was the best meal I ever ate," one of the paratroopers recalled.[15]

MACV hastened to pronounce Dak To a victory. "It's the beginning of a great defeat for the enemy," Westmoreland told the *New York Times*. "We smashed Giap's attack," Westy's military intelligence chief added. That Westy's intelligence shop didn't know that Giap was 5,000 miles away in exile in Hungary was disturbing. Still more disturbing was the tactical result.

Nearly 2,000 Americans were "smashed" in the battle—376 killed and 1,441 wounded. The 4th ID's medical company discovered that it had used more units of blood in those five days on Hill 875 than the hard-fighting division had consumed in the previous eleven months: 300 pounds of blood, and for what? A place that the North Vietnamese had abandoned the instant it lost its tactical advantage. The enemy suffered an estimated 1,000 killed on the hill, mostly to artillery and air strikes, but the battle rendered three 4th ID battalions and the entire 173rd Airborne Brigade "combat ineffective," while MACV sought desperately for fillers.[16]

The American rifle companies had lost an astonishing 51 percent of their strength in the monthlong battle. The heavy American casualties and the successful escape of the NVA 1st Division from an area "secured" by no fewer than seventy-eight American, ARVN, and South Korean maneuver battalions belied again Westmoreland's theory of victory: that the communist forces could be surprised, flushed from cover, "fixed" in place by infantry, and annihilated with firepower.[17]

It was the Americans who were continually surprised—by the enemy resistance and tactics. The four-day struggle for Hill 875 saw the heaviest use of tac air and artillery yet unleashed in the war: 152,000 rounds of artillery and 2,096 sorties of tac air dropping 3,400 tons of ordnance on a small target. Nine hundred tons of food, fuel, and ammo had been flown and driven into Dak To every day to supply the onslaught, and yet, as always in Vietnam, the "great victory" changed nothing on the ground.

By late 1967, Hanoi was infiltrating 14,000 NVA replacements into South Vietnam and recruiting 7,000 new VC every *month*. It was hard to bleed out an enemy whose army was growing, not shrinking, and showing no willingness to compromise or retreat. General Giap later observed of this moment in the war that Westmoreland "could have put in 300,000 more men, even 400,000, but it would have made no difference." The theater was too big, the terrain too difficult, the resistance too stout, and the ARVN too cautious. Nevertheless, General Peers wrote his after-action report in the "we are winning" political tones preferred in Washington and Saigon. He proclaimed Dak To "the turning point of the war in the Central Highlands."[18]

The officers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade knew better. Their analysis took account of facts on the ground: "The enemy continues to choose the

time and the place in which decisive engagements are fought. He fights only where the tactical situation, terrain, battlefield preparation, and the relative strength of the opposing forces favor enemy action—only then does he initiate significant contacts." The lack of any meaningful success at Dak To confirmed the observation of another senior officer: "Trying to win the war tactically was like swimming up Niagara Falls with an anvil around your neck."[19]

By now, it must have been clear to Westmoreland and Abrams that US casualties, even if smaller than the enemy's, were a strategic factor that had to be accepted with extraordinary caution given the small number of American combat troops, the fading of morale inside the Army and Marine Corps, and the rise in opposition to the war in the United States. In the last three months of 1967, 200 Americans died every *week* in Vietnam. Michael Herr, who wrote one of the most powerful books about Vietnam as well as narration and screenplays for *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*, got his first taste of the war at Dak To. He arrived during the struggle for Hill 875, in which those two battalions of the 173rd Airborne Brigade lost 400 killed or wounded in the battle for a cold, foggy, rain-lashed mount whose only value was the presence on its summit of a fleeting number of enemy troops.[20]

Herr watched a Chinook full of paratroopers returning from the hill set down on the landing strip of Dak To, where a welcoming party of Red Cross "donut dollies" had been assembled to cheer the troops up with coffee and donuts. The dollies were one-year volunteers who would try to distract shocked and frightened grunts with games or banter. "Where you from, soldier?" "Hi soldier, what's your name?" the girls called. "And the men from the 173rd just kept walking without answering, staring straight ahead, their eyes rimmed with red from fatigue, their faces pinched and aged with what had happened during the night." Only one of the men paused to answer the shouted queries; he said something in a girl's ear and she began to cry. "The rest just walked past the girls and the large olive-drab coffee urns. They had no idea where they were."[21]

What exactly was Westmoreland "containing" with these bloody operations that were killing and wounding far more Americans than expected? In the course of 1967, the big battles such as Dak To, Cedar Falls, Attleboro, and Junction City hiked the monthly average of 477 American KIAs, which had seemed high in 1966, to a far more alarming 816 American KIAs. US casualties in Vietnam had more than doubled in 1967—from 44,382 killed and wounded on New Year's Day of that year to over 100,000 killed and wounded on New Year's Eve twelve months later. Eight hundred and fifty US aircraft had been shot down in a single year. "Victory is not close at hand. It may be beyond reach," the *New York Times* ventured. The war had been entirely "Americanized"—troop strength surging in two years from 50,000 to 500,000—and yet nothing decisive had been accomplished. Westy spoke of "tremendous progress," but his subordinates in the field didn't. "American officers talk somberly about fighting here for *decades*," one journalist reported from Saigon. "Stalemate," a dirty word in Washington, was on everyone's lips in Vietnam.[22]

In October 1967, *Life* magazine, an early and influential cheerleader for the war, ran up the white flag, declaring that the Vietnam War was no longer "worth winning," no longer "imperative," and no longer worth "asking young Americans to die for."

Congress, which could have cut funding for the war, remained on the sidelines, the senators and representatives finding it politically expedient to "support the troops" with funding rather than risk their "national security" credentials by advocating the withdrawal craved by the vast majority of troops. Attempts to repeal the Tonkin Gulf Resolution or forbid the deployment of draftees to Vietnam in 1966 had received just six and two votes, respectively, Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield, an early critic of the war, explaining his pusillanimity this way: "We are in too deep now."[23]

In November 1967, Bill Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee took another stab at curtailing the president's war powers, his rule by "executive supremacy," but the resolution went nowhere. LBJ's lawyers argued that "declarations of war are out of date" and that the president needed instant power to react to crises with "an immediate riposte." Congress weakly agreed, despite the fact that the Vietnam "riposte" had been going on long enough to call it a war. Congress would not seek to impose a single limit on the war until 1969, when it would *try* (and fail) to forbid the president sending US troops into Laos or Cambodia.[24]

His flank secured by a compliant Congress, Westmoreland turned his fire on another threat: the media. He deplored the influence of Western journalists on public opinion, calling them cat's-paws of Hanoi and

purveyors of fake news, and instructed MACV's public affairs office, JUSPAO, to put the rising American casualties in a positive light. They were trifling beside the enemy's heavier losses, Westy explained.[25]

At Dak To, a battle initiated by the NVA in November 1967 to draw the Americans into the jungled mountains of the tri-border area and away from the populated cities and lowlands, Westmoreland assured Americans that the US losses of 1,800 killed or wounded paled beside total enemy losses of 4,000 or more. Yet when the 173rd Airborne Brigade took Hill 875 at the climax of the battle, they found only forty-four corpses, not the hundreds that might have been expected, and Westy was later discovered to have personally intervened to inflate body count. A US company commander had suffered seventy-nine KIAs and twenty-three wounded to kill small numbers of NVA; Westmoreland had increased the captain's body count to 475. "Too late, it's already gone out," Westy snapped when challenged about the lie.[26]

In November 1967, the NVA launched another border battle. Like Dak To, it was intended to pull American, ARVN, and Korean forces away from the populated cities and coastal plain and into the mountain wilderness—the essential prelude to the Tet Offensive, planned for January 1968. Four NVA regiments, about 25,000 men heavily supported by artillery and antiaircraft guns, began to close around the Marines' Khe Sanh combat base, which sat close to the Laotian border and the Ho Chi Minh Trail on the western edge of I Corps and the DMZ. This border battle seized President Johnson's attention more than the others. The president took the unusual step of demanding a letter from the Joint Chiefs "guaranteeing" that Khe Sanh would not fall if the Marines remained dug in there. "Sign it in blood," the president grunted. The NVA command planned not only to humiliate the Americans at Khe Sanh, seizing the combat base and its battalion of Marines, but also to tear a hole in their border defenses through which NVA divisions could funnel south to reinforce the Tet Offensive.[27]

For anyone viewing this dismal picture, optimism was hard to summon, but Westmoreland summoned it anyway, with the mendacious alacrity that characterized his tenure in Vietnam. He wanted more and more troops—a "minimum force" of 550,000, or an "optimal force" of 672,000—and he insisted that his "Year of Progress" was going well, despite all evidence to the contrary.

"During 1967," Westy wrote, "the enemy lost control of large sectors of the population." The VC were having morale and recruiting problems and had been forced to disperse to avoid American attacks. The US military, Westmoreland alleged, had truly reached the "crossover point," where free-world forces were killing more men in South Vietnam than Hanoi could infiltrate to replace them. Body count in 1967 exceeded infiltration by 31,000. He boasted of "tremendous progress." Attrition was working.[28]

Unfortunately, MACV's own figures belied the rosy nonsense purveyed by Westmoreland in his effort to wring more troops from President Johnson. By year-end 1967, there were 500,000 US troops and 750,000 ARVN and allied troops in South Vietnam against 300,000 VC and NVA troops, yet efforts to destroy the VC were failing, and efforts to interdict the continuing flow of manpower from North Vietnam were also failing. NVA forces in South Vietnam increased from 58,600 in December 1966 to 80,000 in December 1967. An estimated 36,300 infiltrators had entered South Vietnam in 1965, 92,287 in 1966, and 101,263 in 1967. This had prompted the construction of the McNamara Line, as well as the bloody struggle for border posts such as Dak To and Khe Sanh.[29]

Westmoreland hoped eventually to stanch this flow of northern infiltrators and matériel by invading Laos to deny its trails and "sanctuaries" to Hanoi, but that was a pipe dream under any circumstances prevailing in 1967. There were fourteen NVA battalions in Laos, 100,000 Pathet Lao communist guerrillas, and thousands of Chinese troops posing as "volunteers." Looking at this communist horde, CINCPAC made clear to MACV that it could not spare even a squadron of aircraft to expand the war into Laos, where the roads of the Ho Chi Minh Trail continued to multiply.

Farther south on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Cambodia remained a weak, divided country, where officers of the Royal General Staff were actively selling arms and rice to the VC camps inside their own border. Cambodia's government—still led by forty-five-year-old Prince Norodom Sihanouk—was in constant conflict with Saigon over offshore drilling rights, free navigation on the Mekong, the exact location of the border between the two nations, and the status of several disputed islands that had not been settled when the French scuttled from Indochina in 1954.

Even the election in 1966 of a conservative, anticommunist Cambodian government had done nothing to change the policy of "extreme neutrality"

in eastern Cambodia, which amounted to Sihanouk authorizing Hanoi to use Cambodia as a sanctuary in exchange for not destabilizing the Sihanouk regime with support for Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge "forest army."[30]

With obstacles like these—to say nothing of the poor roads and forbidding terrain—CINCPAC warned Westmoreland not even to contemplate operations against the cross-border sanctuaries. With everything committed to South Vietnam, neither troops nor aircraft could be spared for what would have to be massive and sustained operations in Cambodia and Laos, with little chance of success.[31]

Critics who argued that the war could have been won if only the will had been summoned to "take" those communist sanctuaries always neglected to explain how they could have been "taken" and held without troops and aircraft and against the forces of nature, weather, time, domestic opinion, enemy action, and hostile populations and governments. Even as Westmoreland assured the press, the president, and the Congress that he was defeating the enemy, he actually knew the opposite to be true. Laos and Cambodia had become communist highways and sanctuaries, beyond the reach of American capabilities, and MACV's own numbers showed an increase, not a decrease, in enemy strength across South Vietnam, giving the lie to Westmoreland's assertion that the goal of breaking the enemy through attrition "had in good measure been achieved."[32]

What was certifiably being achieved was the breaking of the South Vietnamese people. Their presidential election in September 1967 was a sham, with the all-military Thieu-Ky ticket winning only 34 percent of the vote despite their best efforts at vote rigging. When the National Assembly's committee on elections voted to invalidate the election due to the small plurality and "widespread cheating," Vice President-Elect Ky's National Police commander slouched above them in the gallery, swigging beer and loudly spinning the chamber of his snub-nose .38 Smith & Wesson. The committee's recommendation was rejected, and Thieu and Ky moved into the brand-new, 100-room, 65,000-square-foot presidential palace that had been commissioned by Diem in 1962, entrusted to architect Ngo Viet Thu, and was finally complete.[33]

The elections had been intended to showcase the vibrancy of South Vietnamese democracy, refute the arguments of the Viet Cong, and elect a national figure capable of challenging the aura of Ho Chi Minh. The elections instead exhibited the calcification of Saigon "democracy" in the authoritarian hands of the military. The also-rans in the race were "peace" candidates, leading to credible speculation that they had been defeated more by vote rigging than by the popular will. LBJ rushed to congratulate President Thieu. He called the election "a milestone on the path to a free, secure, and peaceful Vietnam."

Thieu's election, after every serious opponent was banned in advance, "legitimized," the *New York Times* observed, "an unchanged central government, continuation of heavy-handed police tactics, the same generally corrupt officials in the provinces, the same dispirited army, and more war." Painful as this prospect was to Americans, the newspaper concluded, "it is far worse for the South Vietnamese." Of Vice President Ky, a young ARVN officer said this: "No South Vietnamese really looks up to or respects Ky. He could never be our national hero—too young, too flashy, too American, too much the playboy, too much the pilot."[34]

While Thieu and Ky moved into the luxurious palace, a breezy and elegant homage to Edward Durrell Stone's New Formalism, with teak floors, fountains, chandeliers, and reception rooms finished in gold and lacquer, the number of impoverished refugees in South Vietnam had doubled *again*, as crop destruction, defoliation, compulsory relocations, combat operations, B-52 strikes, and round-the-clock H&I barrages by American and ARVN artillery made much of South Vietnam uninhabitable for all but the Viet Cong. On a tour of South Vietnam in 1967, Army chief of staff Harold Johnson was startled to discover that only 10 percent of Army artillery fires and 4 percent of air strikes were actually observed. Nine in ten bombs and shells were dropped blindly into areas that *might* contain VC. This obliterated villages, woods, and farmland. Rice production cratered, as 625,000 acres of farmland were abandoned when their owners were drafted into the army or put out of business by shelling, bombs, and defoliants.[35]

American officials in Saigon continued to pretend that what they were doing was beneficial. They cited Mao Zedong: "We can catch the fish only by drying up the water." In October 1967, Maxwell Taylor published a piece in the *New York Times Magazine* under the title "The Cause in Vietnam Is Being Won." The former chairman of the Joint Chiefs and ambassador to South Vietnam sounded more quixotic than ever, arguing, with a straight

face, that herding one-quarter of South Vietnam's 17 million people into refugee camps was a good thing, for "they are withdrawn from among the human assets so necessary to support the guerrilla movement."[36]

People closer to the action than Max Taylor noted the flaw in his argument. In Quang Ngai province, where the Americans and ARVN had deliberately razed 70 percent of the villages and pushed their inhabitants into refugee camps, an American colonel involved in the exodus reported that apathy and defeatism were the predictable result. "Look, the V.C. get their people to support them. They *organize* the people. Those people are *alive*; they are highly *motivated*. But the people who are supposed to be on our side are just *blobs*. The refugees sit around all day doing *nothing*, and *we are doing nothing about it*."[37]

LBJ's patience with this floundering was wearing thin. Saigon had become the biggest American embassy in the world, with 800 people. MACV's headquarters staff alone now numbered 3,300 officers and men—so many that Westmoreland spent $25 million building "Pentagon East," a new headquarters complex at Tan Son Nhut Airport that featured the largest air-conditioning plant in Asia, four acres of parking lots, and a fifty-page staff directory. And yet what was there to show for it all? Just more smoke and mirrors.[38]

Razing South Vietnamese villages and pushing rural people into refugee camps backfired. Defeatism and apathy were the predictable result. Here dispossessed peasants in Quang Ngai province await processing. (National Archives)

Settled facts were the first casualty of America's war in Vietnam. "It was no trick to find facts to back up the preconceptions," Ward Just wrote from Saigon in 1967. "Facts were everywhere, and with suitable discrimination could be used to support almost *any* argument." Westmoreland, like Harkins before him, found it expedient to argue that the war was going well. He now went to work tailoring the latest depressing facts to support the argument. He knew that the VC and NVA troop numbers were growing, so he manufactured a decline in their numbers by simply subtracting 56,000 VC who had previously been counted in the enemy order of battle. They had political jobs in the hamlets under VC control, he reasoned, as if they would not take up arms the minute their enterprise was threatened. This phony revision of the numbers undergirded Westmoreland's claim that 1967 had been a great success and that "the picture gives rise to optimism for increased success in 1968."[39]

Westmoreland could fake the numbers all he wanted, but rising US casualties and the continuing inertia of the ARVN posed political problems at home, where voters were asking why American boys were being forced to do the fighting for the boys of South Vietnam. "Maybe the people of Nam are worth saving," a platoon leader in the 4th ID wrote in December 1967, "but their army isn't worth shit." Jonathan Schell overheard some American pilots singing during Operation Benton in August 1967: "Throw candy to the ARVN / Gather them all around / Take your twenty mike-mike / And mow the bastards down." *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* all published withering exposés of the ARVN in 1967. The *Newsweek* piece—"Their Lions, Our Rabbits"—was a brutal takedown of the South Vietnamese military, referencing cowardice, desertion, and an inability even to pacify hamlets. American advisers in Vietnam competed among themselves for the distinction of serving with "the absolute worst South Vietnamese division." Johnson was ready to spend just about any sum to make the ARVN better but, to his dismay, Saigon did not want to be made

better, particularly when General Thieu, elected president with only a third of the popular vote in September 1967, got a taste of what "getting better" would involve.[40]

South Vietnamese men were needed, above all, to fill ranks depleted by the ARVN's habit of desertion and draft dodging, and to reconquer all of the areas controlled by the VC. And so MACV proposed to fund a million-man ARVN equipped with M-16 rifles, M-60 machine guns, LAWs, helicopters, M-41 tanks, 105 mm howitzers, and the latest PRC-25 radio sets.

Funding all of that equipment on the back of the American taxpayer turned out to be the easy part. The hard part remained getting a million South Vietnamese into uniform. To get that many, a draft of all eighteen-to-thirty-three-year-olds was required, as well as "specialists" and "experts" as old as forty-five. And to keep a million South Vietnamese under arms, the term of service had to be made open-ended—"for the duration of the war." Eighteen-year-olds drafted in 1968, in other words, would be forced to serve until their thirty-fourth birthday if peace, death, or dismemberment did not intervene. Thieu hesitated even to *propose* conscription on this scale. It would provoke draft riots against the government, and it would never pass the parliament.[41]

With the South Vietnamese shrinking from the fight, Westmoreland ordered an "image-building campaign to publicize the ARVN and offset the common belief that the South Vietnamese won't fight." Westy's PR flack, Colonel Barry Zorthian, called the program "Creating More ARVN Heroes." Westmoreland's lack of seriousness was plain. Washington had pressed him twice in 1967 to create a Korean War–style unified command that would have given him control over the ARVN. Both times Westy refused, breezily explaining that his personal relationships with top ARVN generals ensured unity of effort. In fact, Westmoreland did not dare tackle the problem. He was so frightened by what he might find if he popped the hood on the ARVN Joint General Staff and combat divisions that he came to rely on Zorthian's fluff instead. Fluff, however, would not put rifles on shoulders, boots on the ground, and troops in combat. President-Elect Thieu, who had not even been inaugurated yet, agreed under American pressure to slip an expansive new conscription law into force as an unchallengeable "emergency decree" *before* South Vietnam's new constitution took effect on October 31, 1967.[42]

If Thieu waited for his own inauguration and for the new constitution to take hold, this new "national mobilization" law would have to be debated and approved by the two houses of the National Assembly. Both houses were hotly opposed to the law, knowing that their voters opposed it. Thieu's decree beat them to the punch, but the president-elect was stung by the backlash when he announced the ARVN expansion just five days before his inauguration.[43]

Thieu knew that he had no choice but to mobilize more citizens. The Johnson administration was wavering, apparently willing to negotiate with the Viet Cong to end America's involvement. Thieu had to demonstrate that the South Vietnamese were willing and able to fight on. MACV's analysis of the ARVN in 1967 revealed it to be only 44 percent as effective as US forces—the measure of success being the number of communist troops killed per 1,000 free-world troops engaged in offensive operations. Even more troubling was MACV data showing American combat deaths continuing to exceed ARVN combat deaths in the last half of 1967, putting more pressure on President Johnson to deescalate the war.[44]

American pilots killed or captured during Rolling Thunder raids added still more pressure. The Russians had given the North Vietnamese radar-guided SAMs to counter the Rolling Thunder attacks. Climbing at Mach 3—three times faster than the US jets they were pursuing—the missiles could be evaded only by diving for the ground, a maneuver that dropped pilots out of the path of the SAM but into seamless barrages of 37 mm, 57 mm, and 85 mm antiaircraft guns, whose sights computed altitude, range, and lead instantly. More and more American aircrews were being killed or captured by the enemy.

The facile "signaling" and "graduated pressure" breezily pushed by McGeorge Bundy and McNamara in 1965 were not facile anymore. American air sorties were increasingly flown not to hit important targets but just to take out SAM sites and antiaircraft guns, which blocked the Navy's approach from carriers in the Tonkin Gulf as well as the Air Force's approach along "Thud Ridge"—a line of peaks guiding American jets toward Hanoi and Haiphong from air bases in Thailand. American pilots reported that the enemy's high-low air defense system was so dense that "it was like trying to fly through a rainstorm without hitting a drop." By 1967, North Vietnam was firing 25,000 tons of antiaircraft ammunition

every month, hitting American aircraft at every altitude between 1,300 and 45,000 feet.

LBJ's fastidious rules of engagement remained in force, abbreviated by one pilot this way: "You had to see the target to attack it. You had to see an impact if possible. You had to!" The Americans flew two-seater aircraft, the joke went, so that one pilot could fly while the other read him the rules of engagement. The count of Americans shot from the sky and held as POWs in brutal conditions in North Vietnamese prisons continued to tick upward. One of the latest additions was Lieutenant Commander John McCain III, the son of the Navy admiral poised to take command of all US forces in the Pacific. John McCain was shot down over Hanoi in October 1967.

The war seemed unresolvable. Just packing up and quitting might be the only way to end it. Michael Herr turned on Armed Forces Radio in Saigon in the first week of December 1967 and heard this bulletin: "The Pentagon announced today that, compared to Korea, the Vietnam War will be an economy war, provided that it does not exceed the Korean War in length, which means it will have to end sometime in 1968."[45]

Musings such as this one seized Saigon's attention. To preclude an American deal with the Viet Cong, the new South Vietnamese Senate ratified Thieu's mobilization law on December 8, 1967, but took care to box the Americans in by simultaneously declaring the VC National Liberation Front an "enemy of the nation" and an "instrument of aggression of North Vietnam." Any American deals with the VC, the South Vietnamese Senate avowed, "would infringe the right of self-determination of the Vietnamese people." This official stance would make it harder for Johnson or any other president to negotiate an end to the war.[46]

Saigon's new mobilization law expanded the draft from men in their twenties to men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-eight. In theory, it would nearly double the size of the armed forces—from 600,000 to 1.1 million. But it was already being riddled with loopholes for the well-connected, who were allowed to remain in school or university, or even civilian jobs where they could be "mobilized in place" in "posts of national interest" while peasant sons served in the field.[47]

In the eyes of the South Vietnamese government, LBJ's fervor for war-terminating negotiations was at least as threatening as his push for national mobilization. Thieu, Ky, and the ARVN generals knew that negotiations with the VC could not be undertaken because a coalition government of all parties would have had no place for politicians and generals like them, who were stained by corruption and too close to the Americans. Like Diem before them, the South Vietnamese leaders now began to lean on South Vietnam's Catholics as a bulwark against American retreat, creating a lobbying group in 1967 called the Greater Unity Force to attack "defeatist tendencies in the United States," lead "Anti-False Peace" demonstrations, and insist on a continuation of the war until communism was defeated.[48]

"Peace"—that condition sought most avidly by the Vietnamese people—had paradoxically become a "dirty word" in Saigon government circles, a British diplomat observed. He watched the Saigon police race to tear down a banner with the anodyne message "In 1967, the military forces and the people of Vietnam along with the allied forces will succeed in their quest for peace." To Thieu and Ky, "peace" was American code for regime-ending negotiations with the VC. They banned all references to it in the press and public demonstrations. In meetings with Thieu, LBJ pressed him to compromise with the VC to split them from Hanoi. Thieu refused even to consider the idea. Senator Fulbright, who was urging LBJ to negotiate directly with the VC, was savaged by the Saigon press, most spitefully by the papers controlled by Thieu and Ky. Bill Fulbright, they wrote, was a "dotard," a "colonialist par excellence," a "dictator," a "dirty imperialist."[49]

LBJ was horrified by the spectacle, and groped again for a way out of this poorly managed war. The exit, however, remained blocked by the same irreducible facts. Johnson believed that Operation Rolling Thunder—his ability to drop 1,000 tons of bombs a day on North Vietnam—was his hole card. He would concede a "bombing halt" only in return for Hanoi's agreement to stop infiltrating troops into South Vietnam. Hanoi refused even to consider such "reciprocity."

Le Duan believed that Ho Chi Minh's greatest error, and the reason for the national hero's eclipse now, had been Ho's willingness to negotiate from a position of weakness in 1945 and 1954. That had led to the division of Vietnam and the introduction of first French and then American forces. The lesson for Le Duan was simple: negotiate only when you have the enemy beaten, on the ropes, and willing, even eager, to accept *your* maximum aims.

But Hanoi's war aims still clashed irreconcilably with America's. Hanoi insisted that the Geneva Treaty of 1954 be respected. The Americans would

have to stop bombing North Vietnam, withdraw all of their troops from South Vietnam, and then permit the nationwide elections that were supposed to have been held eleven years earlier. Washington's war aim was for a Korean-style solution—partition of Vietnam into two countries at the 17th parallel. A compromise between the two positions would necessarily involve the Americans agreeing to nationwide elections and a role for the Viet Cong in South Vietnamese elections and politics.[50]

Johnson was powerless to make Hanoi negotiate, and he knew it. "You can't tell American voters one day that the United States plans to get out of Vietnam, and then on the next day tell Ho Chi Minh that we'll stick it out for 20 years," the CIA's special assistant for Vietnamese affairs reminded the president. "Why would anyone in North Vietnam *believe* it?" Le Duan certainly didn't. He knew that Johnson was flagging. The last thing the North Vietnamese leader would do now was concede anything that might alleviate LBJ's predicament and permit the president to keep forces in South Vietnam. The Americans, Le Duan believed, needed to be driven out, to be confronted with unending loss and futility.[51]

In December 1967, Secretary of Defense McNamara made clear that Westmoreland's leash had run out of slack. If there couldn't be peace, then there must be less war. Max Taylor offered the president four alternatives, pullout, pullback, all-out, and stick-it-out, but insisted that the first three, a year before the 1968 elections, would disappoint American voters by reinforcing the impression of "self-stagnation" in "a hopeless struggle." It would be more expedient to advertise something that at least *sounded* dynamic.

President Johnson agreed and now committed to what he called "the gospel of pacification." The Pentagon's "five urgent requirements" for 1968 were formulated to shift the focus from search and destroy to pacification, with the aim of getting the United States out of South Vietnam by fixing the roads and waterways, building jails, increasing the number of advisers for pacification and intelligence exploitation, expanding the ARVN and ruff-puffs, and adding more Revolutionary Development cadre teams through the CORDS program.[52]

In Washington, National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, still keen as ever on the war, pressured the CIA's Office of Current Intelligence to portray pacification as a great success story. Rostow was told that such a portrayal would be at odds with the facts. The fifty-one-year-old national security adviser, derided by Senator Fulbright as "LBJ's Rasputin," kept up the pressure, warning the CIA's George Allen that there would be consequences if he did not truckle. "I am amazed at your unwillingness to support your president in his time of need," Rostow threatened. Allen caved and provided data that statistically showed improvement, but he added a cover letter that described the continuing failure of the program. Rostow detached the cover letter, threw it in the trash, and handed Allen's data to the president. "At last," Rostow sighed, "an objective appraisal from CIA."[53]

The CIA also disputed MACV's numbers on enemy strength. Westmoreland, now in full political campaign mode on behalf of the president, was trying so hard to show progress in Vietnam that he simply refused to count all of the VC operating there. When CBS News later reported how much he had prevaricated, airing a special titled *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*, Westmoreland would seek $120 million in damages from the network for its "defamatory falsehoods," a rather wild act of chutzpah by the then seventy-year-old retired general. The case collapsed before it could be heard before a jury, Westy settling without a penny of damages to avoid the likelihood that he—having indeed lied in 1967—might have to pay CBS' legal fees in 1985.[54]

In 1967, the fifty-three-year-old Westy was still large, in charge, and accustomed to obedience. He insisted that only "hard figures" of VC forces would be used. There would be no more extrapolation from captured documents and prisoner interrogations. The only VC that MACV would count would be those physically identified in the field by the combat commands.

By the end of 1967, the gulf between the CIA and MACV numbers had widened dangerously, the CIA reporting that there were 600,000 VC in South Vietnam—a full 300,000 more than MACV was reporting. The CIA was counting not only armed combatants but also all of the irregular forces the VC used for information, food, shelter, labor, recruiting, and logistics. Sam Adams, a CIA analyst in Saigon, revealed that an Army officer in MACV told him off the record that MACV's military intelligence personnel had been ordered to keep the VC total under 300,000 for political reasons. Wheeler ordered Westy to reject the CIA numbers: "If these numbers reach the public domain," the chairman of the Joint Chiefs wrote, "they'll literally blow the lid off Washington."[55]

Military intelligence, Michael Herr observed, had by 1967 become little more than a "jargon stream," a "carnival bear, broken and dumb, an Intelligence beast, our own." Nothing it told you got you any closer to winning the war. The CIA director, Richard Helms, was pressured to agree to the deflated MACV figures, and he went along, rejecting the "exaggerated military strength" estimates of his own agency with "arguments so complex," Sam Adams recalled, "that I became confused." The argument was more than academic. Westmoreland was about to be hit in the places he considered most secure by the full force of the Viet Cong.[56]

In a weird, split-screen moment, Westmoreland was back in Washington taking a kind of victory lap while the politburo in Hanoi authorized the Tet Offensive. Westy had been quietly trying to persuade the president to escalate the war and adopt a more offensive strategy. Now, with US elections a year away, he reverted to the blarney that was his trademark. He appeared before House and Senate committees and sat down for television interviews. At the National Press Club on November 21, 1967, Westy presented his "Progress Report on the War in Vietnam." The enemy, he declared, was nearly beaten, "unable to mount a major offensive" of any kind. He hadn't won "a major battle" in over a year, was "losing control of the scattered population under his influence," and, Westy improbably added, had been "dealt a mortal blow by the installation of a freely-elected representative government."[57]

Westmoreland recited LBJ's talking points for the 1968 presidential race: "Whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing." Victory, Westy continued, "begins to come into view." He mooted a "withdrawal strategy" in which the successful war could soon be "phased down" and turned over to the South Vietnamese. On the last day of 1967, Westy assured the White House that the number of VC and NVA troops in South Vietnam had fallen to just 115,000 under MACV's punishing attacks—hardly enough to survive a 1968 campaign against 1.2 million allied forces.

This was the context for Westy's notorious statement during a meeting with LBJ that there was "light at the end of the tunnel." It was a time, Tom Buckley of the *New York Times* recalled, "when American optimism about the course of the war was reaching a zenith of fatuity." But only on the surface. The generals knew that their strategic objective, defined in 1965 as "seeking an independent non-Communist South Vietnam," had to be sharply curtailed to something more along the lines of "buy time for Saigon to grow in capacity and popular support so that it can survive on its own." *Pullback*, in short. But such a plan would inspire no one. With elections around the corner, it was better to feign victory.[58]

In December, LBJ awarded Westmoreland a new oak leaf cluster. "All the challenges have been met," the president grinned. Inwardly, he seethed. "I am like the steering wheel of a car without any control," Johnson fretted. Westy's barnstorming had pushed the president's approval rating back up, from 39 to 50 percent, but not for long. The war just rolled on—with no end in sight.

Westmoreland, who had suppressed his desire for a troop increase and a wider war throughout 1967, felt increasingly confident that he had played the game right. Bob McNamara, wrung out by six years of twelve-hour days, discredited, and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, had announced his resignation in November. President Johnson, who felt personally betrayed by resignations, would keep the exhausted McNamara in harness until February 1968. In his valedictory memos to LBJ, the SecDef pronounced the war unwinnable: increasing US forces from 465,000 to 525,000, he warned the president in November, "will not produce any significant change," just more encounters, and more casualties, followed by requests for yet more ground forces.[59]

But McNamara would soon be replaced at the Pentagon by a hawk: sixty-one-year-old Clark Clifford. Clifford had assailed Bob McNamara's pessimism in November and argued for an intensification of the war: "The war is a success, so we should go right on doing what we're going to do." Clifford was known as Johnson's "war minister." If LBJ won reelection, Clifford would continue as secretary of defense. If Nixon won, the new president would almost certainly put in someone even more hawkish than Clark Clifford. Either way, Westy would probably get the troops he needed to move into the NVA's Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries, cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and win the war.[60]

Chapter 12

YEAR OF THE MONKEY

In November 1967, the communist leadership in Hanoi officially adopted Le Duan's "Strategy of the General Offensive and General Uprising," which had been worked out over the previous several months. It would proceed in three phases; the first, still under way, was the fighting along the borders of South Vietnam to lure allied troops away from the population centers and into wilderness areas like Dak To and Khe Sanh.[1]

The second phase, now imminent, was a general offensive to collapse the South Vietnamese government and military. One hundred and twenty thousand NVA and VC main-force troops in South Vietnam would be reinforced by 200,000 NVA infantry now moving south on the Ho Chi Minh Trail with 80,000 tons of supplies. On the appointed day, they would break from cover and wrest away South Vietnam's towns and cities in a stunning coup de main.

Le Duan expected the communists to seize power in every corner of South Vietnam and hand it to "revolutionary administrations" and "national peace-force alliances," which would be Hanoi's fig leaves for annexation. That would be the signal for phase three, a "general uprising" against all remnants of the Saigon regime by the entire war-weary South Vietnamese people.[2]

For Hanoi, it was a major shift from the doctrine of protracted guerrilla war to a conventional attack on US and ARVN forces that might inflict devastating casualties and open the door to a total destruction of

Saigon's rural pacification program and a VC uprising in the cities. It aimed to capitalize on Westmoreland's failure to achieve anything decisive in 1967.

Le Duan, who by now had shouldered Ho Chi Minh out of the pic- ture, judged that LBJ had escalated in 1967 as far as the American people were willing to go. The war had entered a "strategic stalemate." The time, Le Duan declared on January 18, 1968, was ripe for "thundering blows" to "change the face of the war," "shake the aggressive will" of the Americans, and force them to "change strategy and de-escalate the war."

The communists would not have to defeat every American formation— how could they? American forces, which Westmoreland had conveniently scattered in the border regions, would be fixed in place with diversionary attacks or bypassed, permitting stealthy VC and NVA units to strike what Le Duan called "the major center" of South Vietnam: the towns and cities. "In the innermost areas," an NVA planning document elaborated, "there are nothing but puppet and police authorities. The U.S. forces are outermost."[3]

Le Duan hoped that the general offensive during the Tet holiday in February 1968 would sweep all before it. In the event that it didn't, the NVA planned a second general offensive in May and a third in August. The Tet Offensive would overwhelm South Vietnam with a countrywide assault on military bases, government offices, and every major city, town, and village. The May offensive, if needed, would focus the attack on the South Vietnamese military headquarters in Saigon. If the August offensive was needed, it would hit the "Saigon Circle"—the area north and west of the capital containing the big American military bases at Long Binh and Bien Hoa.[4]

Defense Minister Giap later described Hanoi's approach in this way: "We were not strong enough to drive out a half-million American troops, but that wasn't our aim." The aim, he said, was "to break the will of the American government to continue the war" with a great *psychological* blow. Of Westmoreland's belief in troop numbers and technology, Giap scoffed: "If we had focused on the balance of forces, we would have been defeated in two hours." The Americans, Giap said, had to be persuaded that the North Vietnamese would go on until victory, that there would be no easy exit: "another twenty years, even a hundred years, as long as it took to win, regardless of cost." He called this war *à la manière vietnamienne*—"war Vietnamese style," in a land that had struggled against foreign invaders for 4,000 years. The enemy would be pinned in a quagmire and exhausted.[5]

The communists relied on a combination of deceit, surprise, and faith in the inefficiency of the allied armies. The VC had been offering Tet cease-fires since the arrival of American troops in 1965. They were intended to drive a wedge between the Americans and the South Vietnamese—as VC leaders put it, "to discriminate between the invading American soldiers and the puppet Vietnamese soldiers, to protect the people and stir up patriotism among the Vietnamese soldiers during the sacred holiday."

Tet cease-fires were always the occasion for VC-organized demonstrations before the offices of province and district chiefs and in the big cities. Crowds would appear waving signs—"Down with artillery fire and air strikes on villages, down with the military draft." Demonstrators would demand poor relief, slum clearance, the release of political prisoners, and a Tet bonus for workers, all calculated to incite criticism of the South Vietnamese government.

If the Americans attacked during the holiday, it would further harm their image and raise the prestige of the communists. The VC themselves always abused the cease-fire. The communists had what American officials called "a contemptuous attitude toward truce arrangements," viewing them as just another way to take advantage of a gullible enemy. A VC cadre killed south of Da Nang on the eve of the 1966 cease-fire carried an order that read: "We've requested a ceasefire during Tet, and during the ceasefire we will attack the enemy."[6]

Though Hanoi had planned to launch the offensive in March 1968, they moved it up to coincide with that year's Tet cease-fire, which conveniently had been extended from twenty-four to thirty-six hours at Pope Paul VI's request. Tet Nguyen Dan—the lunar new year—fell each year in late January or early February and marked the start of spring in Vietnam. It was celebrated with a week of vacation to greet the new year and the new animal spirit brought by the twelve-year Chinese calendar cycle.[7]

The spring festival was a time of merriment and family reunion. For the Vietnamese, it was like a combination of every Western holiday rolled into one—their only real holiday of the year. The departing animal spirit (1967's goat) would be sent off with a midnight meal and gifts to ensure that he gave a good account of the family's activities during the expiring lunar year to the Jade Emperor. The incoming spirit of 1968 (the monkey) would be honored in the same way.[8]

For 1968, the Tet cease-fire was scheduled to go into effect at 6 p.m. on January 29. At that time, half of the ARVN, many of the ruff-puffs, and most of the National Police would already have taken leave for Tet, and the various bases and garrisons around the country would be held by skeleton forces, or Americans alone.[9]

This was just the break that Hanoi needed to make a success of the general offensive. Hanoi's respect for American combat troops did not extend to the ARVN: "If attacked fiercely," an NVA directive alleged, "they will disintegrate; their morale is poor; they fear our regular units; their paper strength is large but their combat strength is low." Organized in the image of the US Army, the ARVN was a pale imitation: "They are diversified among branches that become confused in combat."[10]

Assessing the political scene in Washington, Hanoi calculated that it would be enough to savage the ARVN in combat, wound the Americans, overrun the government-held villages, provoke uprisings in the towns and cities, and demonstrate conclusively that Saigon could not protect its own people or even itself against the communists. If these things happened, the North Vietnamese politburo reasoned, "the military, political, and psychological conditions would be conducive to opening negotiations for the withdrawal of U.S. forces." The Americans would leave because there would be nothing to defend—an already weak cause would be rendered hopeless.[11]

For the NVA military planners, the ultimate success of the Tet Offensive hinged on two things: the communist ability to defeat the allied forces in battle, and the reluctance of LBJ to widen the war. In January 1968, the Americans had ninety-six infantry and sixty-four artillery battalions in Vietnam. Those 150,000 combat troops, reinforced by 23,000 South Koreans and 4,000 Australians, were barely enough to hold the line in South Vietnam. If LBJ responded to the aggression of Tet by putting in *more* troops and bombers, crossing the DMZ, and invading North Vietnam, the whole offensive plan of Generals Giap and Van Tien Dung would backfire, and COSVN's general uprising, organized by Pham Hung and General Hoang Van Thai, would be crushed.[12]

But the probability of a US invasion of North Vietnam had to be reckoned as quite low. LBJ feared Chinese or Soviet intervention if he invaded, and the president knew that the limited war in Vietnam had been expanded to its political limits. There were already half a million US military personnel in Vietnam, plus 5,900 aircraft. America's commitments in more vital theaters continued to be starved of resources to maintain these high levels of manpower and equipment. Invading North Vietnam risked not only a wider war but also the further hollowing out of America's armed forces and finances, as well as a surge of antiwar protest. The American dilemma of Vietnam, seen from Hanoi, was that there was not enough force to win, and yet the force could not feasibly be expanded due to American frustration with the war and other commitments in Europe, Korea, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

To test LBJ's resolve, further thin the number of American troops near the cities, and open another path into South Vietnam, General Dung preceded the Tet Offensive with a major assault on the Marine combat base at Khe Sanh on January 21, 1968. Khe Sanh had been quiet since the "hill fights" of the previous year. These days it was entrusted to a single battalion of the US 26th Marine Regiment. A crushing NVA barrage now hit it—from long-range, heavy-caliber guns in Laos as well as from 82 mm mortars and 122 mm rockets positioned in the hills around Khe Sanh, some on the lower slopes of heights controlled by the Marines.

Inside the combat base, American helicopters were destroyed, trucks and tents blown away, the mess hall flattened, and the base's fuel storage and ammo dump set on fire. Eleven thousand rounds of ammo cooked off over the next forty-eight hours, pelting the Marines with their own ordnance as well as clouds of tear gas. The cannonade, backed by an estimated 20,000 troops of the NVA 320th and 325C Divisions, was intended to draw Westmoreland's attention back to the periphery, to pull American troops away from the populated areas that were about to be hit by the Tet Offensive, but also to feel out LBJ. Would the president punish the attack by invading North Vietnam, or would he remain on the defensive, leaving the initiative to the enemy?[13]

Westmoreland conferred with General Robert Cushman, who had replaced Lew Walt in command of III Marine Amphibious Force. They decided to hold and reinforce Khe Sanh with four additional battalions. Westy believed that the North Vietnamese were bluffing, that here and elsewhere they were "conducting a short-term surge effort...to improve their chances of gaining their ends through political means, perhaps through

negotiations." To deny them *any* wins, Westmoreland declared that the alternately dusty and rain-lashed Khe Sanh plateau would become "the Western Anchor of our defense."[14]

With NVA infiltration accelerating, Westmoreland's priority remained what he called "border-sealing." American maneuver battalions would be pushed out to the borders to block infiltration and stop the steady creep of NVA sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam. Westmoreland was playing into Hanoi's hands, putting his best units out on what MACV termed the "extreme border" and leaving the interior of South Vietnam, where 82 percent of the population lived, thinly guarded.[15]

With Khe Sanh garrisoned by Marines, Cushman went along with Westy's rationale that the combat post needed to be held not only for military reasons—to slow enemy infiltration of men and supplies—but for political reasons as well. It was important to avoid "taking a step backward" at a time when Americans were being told that victory was "coming into view." But the counterarguments were at least as compelling. With two NVA divisions threatening Khe Sanh and two more in the vicinity, a single Marine regiment there would be exceedingly vulnerable. The Marines lacked the helicopters and troops to launch the airmobile assaults that could relieve pressure on the garrison. Far from an "anchor," Khe Sanh was a place that could easily be skirted, as it had been for years.[16]

The NVA would use their superior numbers to cut Route 9, forcing the Americans to fly everything into Khe Sanh, and yet if the combat base, built for a battalion, was reinforced to a strength of five battalions, as Westy planned, its daily supply needs would balloon from 50 tons to 185 tons. Somehow all of this would have to be flown in despite enemy artillery fire and regular "below minimum" visibility. In the White House, Max Taylor, who these days was running LBJ's war room, argued against remaining at Khe Sanh. "Withdraw," he advised the president. "Whatever the past value of the position, it is a positive liability now." But Westmoreland forged ahead, grumbling about all of the "one-upmanship" by "armchair strategists" in Washington. To some, Westy seemed undone by the challenges, one of his colonels remarking that "everybody here is wandering around without any clear-cut direction or management."[17]

Khe Sanh would provide a focus of sorts. Westmoreland viewed the combat base as the logical place to launch offensive operations into Laos if LBJ or his successor ever endorsed the general's proposal to widen the war and attack the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Like Westy's "scissors theory," which held that his major operations on the periphery in 1967 were intended to stop the North Vietnamese from cutting South Vietnam in half—never a real possibility until the Americans left Vietnam—Westy now vaunted the importance of Khe Sanh, reinforcing it in the hope that he could fight a major battle there and notch another "victory."[18]

Unable to maneuver there, Westmoreland would, as he put it, "box in the slippery NVA and VC." If the enemy is "willing to stand and fight, it's a good idea to oblige him," Westy said in his peppy way. He correctly estimated that at least two of the four NVA divisions known to be in I Corps were now at Khe Sanh. Westy asserted that 5,000 Marines and 1,000 ARVN Rangers at Khe Sanh, crammed hurriedly into a base built for 1,000, would be able to "fix the enemy in position around the base while the Allied air and artillery battered him into senselessness," keeping those enemy divisions far from the "vital internal organs of South Vietnam."[19]

As the reference to "the vital internal organs of South Vietnam" attested, Westmoreland's rationale for Khe Sanh was assembled later, with the benefit of hindsight, when he knew about Tet and could claim that he was pinning down units at Khe Sanh that would otherwise be overrunning the cities and towns of South Vietnam. But, in truth, the operation never made much sense and was a poor use of the Marines sent there. General Lowell English, deputy commander of the 3rd Marine Division, thought that the defense made no sense at all. Marines at Khe Sanh did little to stop infiltration. The enemy could just continue to bypass it. "When you're at Khe Sanh," General English groused, "you're not really anywhere. You could lose it and you really haven't lost a damn thing."[20]

But Westmoreland was fixated on body count, in the hope that he could lure elusive communist troops onto the plateau at Khe Sanh and kill them. That was the real reason for Khe Sanh—that, and his determination not to suffer anything resembling a Dien Bien Phu. President Johnson had installed a sand-table model of the Marine combat base in the White House Situation Room, such was his own obsession with the place, which LBJ inevitably compared to the Alamo. Khe Sanh, Westy agreed, was "not just another battle." It was a *symbol* of American determination to hold the line in Vietnam. He gave Operation Scotland, the Marine mission at Khe Sanh,

priority over every other operation in South Vietnam, and he layered Operation Niagara over it.

Niagara, as the name suggested, would be a torrent of airpower: close air support, radar-controlled bombing, and B-52 Arc Light strikes. The scale of Niagara was stunning. From January to April 1968, when the siege of Khe Sanh would be lifted, American jets would fly more sorties over the combat base every day than they flew over the rest of I Corps, which was the most violent theater of the war. In that same period, Air Force B-52s would fly 85 percent more sorties and drop 82 percent more bombs around the flyspeck of Khe Sanh every day than they dropped on all of South Vietnam and the DMZ. The Marine outpost became, as one visitor put it, the "passion, the false love object in the heart of the Command." In the absence of a real strategy, it focused allied efforts. But then, a few days later, the focus abruptly shifted.[21]

Legend has it that the Tet Offensive came as a surprise. It did not. The portents and much hard evidence of its imminence were everywhere. It was Westmoreland, determined to get on with fighting the war on the frontiers, who ignored or downplayed them. He continued to quarrel with the CIA about the true number of enemy combatants and support troops inside South Vietnam. By late 1967 he claimed that he had ground the communist main forces down to 115,000, whereas the CIA put the number (conservatively) at 225,000, noting that enemy recruitment was increasing, not declining, and that communist units were taking a more "offensive posture" in every corps area.[22]

None of this would come as a great surprise to Westmoreland. His own field units were reporting signs of an impending and massive attack, and his corps commanders questioned his complacency in the face of the gathering storm. Two new NVA divisions had been infiltrated south of the DMZ. Captured documents instructed VC local and main-force units all over South Vietnam to "prepare the battlefield" for attacks by moving caches of food, weapons, and ammo closer to the cities and towns. In I Corps, the American Division captured prisoners and documents in December 1967 that stated plainly that all of the main towns were going to be hit "in early '68," and that Route 1 would be cut and Chu Lai airfield attacked to prevent American and ARVN counterattacks. Other reports spoke of a "pressurized VC conscription drive" of all men between sixteen and thirty-five years of age to "meet the *imminent* requirements of the battlefield." ARVN agents reported that all village communist party chapters were being staffed with female cadres to free the males for combat.[23]

The enemy plan was to attack towns and installations in the I and II Corps areas on January 29, 1968, and then, before daylight on January 31, with most of the South Vietnamese military on leave, to launch the nationwide Tet Offensive on the first night of the Vietnamese lunar new year.

Thirty-nine of forty-four provincial capitals would be hit, plus seventy-one district towns and the autonomous cities of Saigon and Da Nang. All would be attacked suddenly with mortars, rockets, and ground assaults. The goal was to wipe out centers of political authority and essential military infrastructure: base camps, airfields, and logistics hubs. Tactically, the enemy intended to confuse the Americans, send them rushing off to defend the remote places hit on January 29, and pin the rest down in defensive positions in the populated areas.

Hanoi and COSVN also planned to destroy the pacification program and take over all of the rural areas that had been clawed back under government protection by the CORDS program. Strategically, the communists sought to provoke a general uprising and topple the Thieu-Ky regime, opening the door to a coalition government controlled by the communists.[24]

General Fred Weyand, who commanded II Field Force, the Army corps command that guarded III Corps and Saigon, opposed Westy's plan for 1968 to concentrate on the frontiers and "seal the border." Weyand had fifty-three battalions in III Corps, and Westy wanted thirty-nine of them committed to operations in the jungles, hills, and swamps along the Cambodian border, more than 100 miles from Saigon, to which it would be exceedingly difficult to return them in an emergency.

Weyand gaped at Westmoreland's detachments to the frontiers: Westy sent the 1st Brigade of the US 101st Airborne Division plus two ARVN battalions on Operation San Angelo, which was to locate and destroy any NVA units trying to infiltrate over the Cambodian border during the Tet truce. Westy also sent two brigades of the 25th ID out to the wilderness around Tay Ninh, sixty miles west of Saigon, to resume the clearing operations that had ended inconclusively with Operation Junction City in 1967. He then sent four battalions of the 101st Airborne Division up to I Corps, where, as always, threats were multiplying along the DMZ. "If we do not violently

contest every attempt to get NVA units into South Vietnam," Westmoreland wrote the Joint Chiefs, "we permit him to expand his system of bases in-country, levy taxes on the people, get their rice, and prove to the people that the NVA is very much alive in South Vietnam."[25]

These detachments to the border areas left just fourteen American and ARVN battalions in the zone around Saigon, Long Binh, and Bien Hoa, where South Vietnam's key political and military assets were located and where 80 percent of the population lived. This was the "Saigon Circle," the critical zone surrounding the capital, which included Weyand's headquarters and supplies at Long Binh Post. It was also the seat of the vast American air base at Bien Hoa, which, with 857,000 landings and takeoffs a year, was the busiest airport in the world. At the center of the circle were MACV headquarters, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, and the Saigon airfield at Tan Son Nhut.

The border, Weyand argued, was not the main threat. Troops operating there would be useless if the enemy struck at Saigon. They would be too far and too scattered to get back by helicopter. They would have to return on fixed-wing aircraft, slowly, and into air bases like Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut that might already have fallen into enemy hands.[26]

Weyand's intelligence on the eve of Tet showed five NVA regiments moving toward Saigon and the VC 5th Division approaching Bien Hoa. NVA "fillers" were replacing casualties in the VC units, and they were all equipped with AK-47s, RPGs, and heavier weapons like the 120 mm mortar and 122 mm rocket. Something really big was happening, for the major battles signaled by all of the inflowing intelligence violated the enemy's inveterate caution: the VC habit of moving stealthily and undertaking attacks only when favorable strength ratios were guaranteed.

Still, it was hard to get the complete picture—the communists gave plans of attack only to select leaders. The troops received their movement orders at the last minute. Faced with this uncertainty, Weyand persuaded Westmoreland to dial back the border operations, leaving twenty-two battalions in those peripheral areas and locating twenty-seven battalions, twice as many as Westy had planned, in the Saigon Circle, all within assault helicopter range of the vital points.[27]

It would prove to be a lifesaving decision. The same radio chatter and headquarters spread that had alerted the Americans to the impending attack on Dak To now indicated that the communists were massing for an attack on the major towns and cities of South Vietnam, including Saigon. In early January 1968, Weyand showed Westmoreland a map that sketched the movement of three NVA divisions and three main-force VC regiments toward Saigon. "I can see these guys moving inward," Weyand said. "They're not staying in their base areas." He pointed on the map to the Cambodian border and added: "*We're* going to be up here in the base areas and *they're* going to be down here somewhere." His hand traveled to the Saigon area. "I don't know what they've got in mind, but there's an attack coming."[28]

There was indeed. The NVA plan for III Corps was to hold the Americans on the periphery with the NVA 7th and 9th Divisions, which would pin down as many battalions as they could before infiltrating and blocking the roads most critical for reinforcement of threatened areas. The VC 5th Division would attack the Bien Hoa complex, the hub of American airpower in Vietnam. Eleven more VC battalions would attack Saigon. In all, COSVN committed thirty-five of fifty-four available VC main-force and local battalions to the initial assault.

The VC who infiltrated into the heart of Saigon *before* the fighting began did it easily, for they were just 4,000 guerrillas coming into a city of 3 million in the midst of a noisy, busy holiday period. Many of them infiltrated in 100-man companies, walking right past Saigon's police and military checkpoints. Many came in disguised as small ARVN units. With so many ARVN troops passing in and out of the city to take leave for Tet, no one noticed. Others arrived in civilian clothing, riding buses and taxis, the latter driven by sympathetic Saigon cab drivers. Still more simply walked across the paddies and swamps that bordered the city, or alighted from barges and sampans that were constantly plying the city's waterfront and canals. They recognized each other by using secret signals—sleeves rolled up or down, a white band on the left arm, or an incomplete uniform. They armed themselves at cache sites inside Saigon that had been filled with weapons over the previous sixty days, and then swapped their white armbands for red ones when they went into action.[29]

The VC had studied traffic patterns and security routines and smuggled weapons into the city on food, rubber, and lumber trucks or under heaps of clothing in the three-wheeled carts of market vendors. Communist secrecy was maintained by a general ignorance of the plan among the attackers.

They were told the bare minimum—where to assemble once inside Saigon's city limits—but not told how long to fight or where to retreat if necessary. This must have alarmed the more prudent among the VC, for they were lightly armed for such a big mission: an assault rifle, 450 rounds of ammo, and just one grenade per man, with each squad issued a light machine gun and one RPG as well.[30]

In I Corps, the other main objective of the Tet Offensive, the NVA planned to strike decisively at Hue with three infantry regiments, three sapper battalions, and an artillery battalion. In contrast with Saigon and III and IV Corps, where the fighting was led by the VC, two-thirds of the communist troops deployed in I and II Corps were NVA.

Hue, Vietnam's imperial capital in the nineteenth century, was the NVA's prime target. With its walled forbidden city and royal tombs along the Perfume River, the communists called it "the nest of feudalist mandarins and monarchs, the brain of the reactionary spirit." Hue and Saigon had competing elites and networks and competing visions of the future. The communists knew this, and they also knew about the festering Buddhist Struggle Movement as well as the political rivalry between the Thieu-Ky government and the ARVN garrison in Hue that had exploded into civil war in 1966. They planned to exploit every one of these fissures to seize and hold a major city in South Vietnam for the first time.[31]

The communists looked at the allied forces around Hue—the US 3rd Marine Division and the 1st ARVN Division, plus ten companies of Regional Force militia and fifty platoons of Popular Forces—and concluded that they were not enough. Between them, they mustered only about 7,000 troops "able to fight well"; the rest would surrender or run away.

More critically, the NVA learned that "the inner perimeter"—Hue and the populated coastal strip—was "nearly unprotected." Westy had taken the bait and gone hunting at Khe Sanh, Dak To, and elsewhere on the wild frontier. Frustrated by his inability to fight the enemy in populated areas without massive collateral damage to civilians, he leaped at the opportunity to meet them in the unpopulated areas, where he could use his firepower without restraint. He believed that he had inflicted so many casualties on the communists in 1967 that they lacked the strength to fight simultaneously on the border and in the interior.[32]

The NVA plan took full advantage of Westmoreland's yearning for decisive operations on the frontier. Hanoi would use VC and NVA units in I Corps "to attack the unguarded inner area" and then move outward, rolling up the more than 100 strong points the ARVN had established as an outer defense system. For the rest, Hanoi estimated that it had 400,000 VC sympathizers in I Corps who would rise up to defeat the ruff-puff units while the main-force battalions were attacking the harder targets. "The people *must* stand up because our armed forces alone will fail to win."[33]

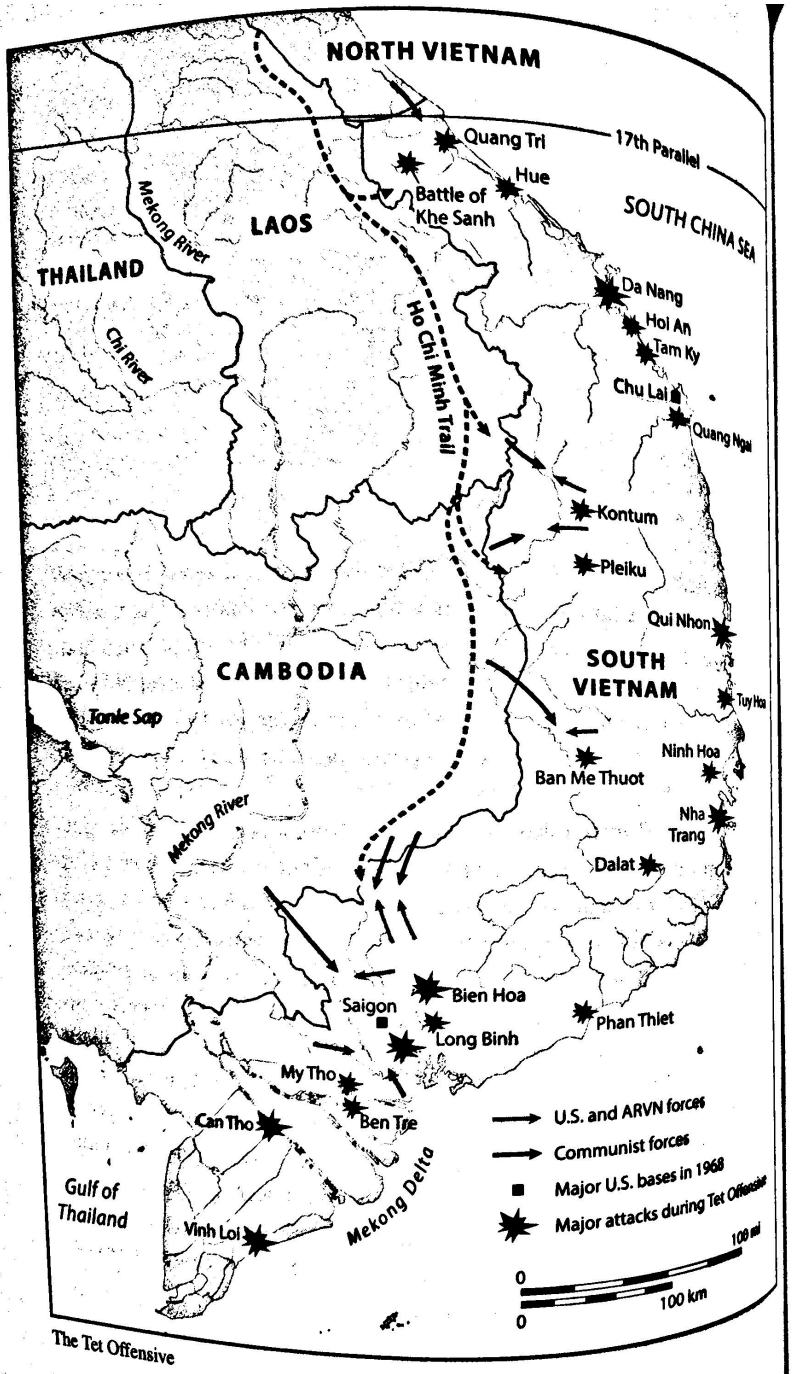
Chapter 13

TET

The first attacks of the Tet Offensive were delivered in faraway II Corps on January 29. Thirty-five hundred communists attacked the towns of Kontum province, while 4,600 hit Pleiku and its surrounding camps and towns. The allied defenses there shook under the blow, for they had been drained of troops after the long, bloody fight for Dak To, when Westy had proclaimed "victory" and pronounced II Corps ready for broader pacification by CORDS.[1]

In Pleiku, Private John Ketwig awoke from a deep sleep in his compound at the foot of Artillery Hill. Most firefights in Vietnam were over quickly, enemy mortar or rocket units firing a salvo and scuttling away before they could be targeted by a firebase or a gunship, but this one was different. It went on for hours—waves of rockets, mortar rounds, small-arms fire, and then return fire from the American batteries on Artillery Hill. The enemy fire struck everywhere: Pleiku City, Artillery Hill, Camp Holloway, and the US 4th ID headquarters on Titty Hill.[2]

Kontum City was saved by the rapid reaction of its American garrison. The helicopter gunships were on "strip alert" and the perimeter bunkers were fully manned. When the communists attacked, it was their turn to be surprised, as the gunships roared aloft instantly and engaged targets at will, catching hundreds of NVA attackers on the open ground between the jungle and the perimeter defenses.



The Tet Offensive

Fast American reaction repulsed all of the opening attacks in II Corps—at Ban Me Thuot, Kontum City, Pleiku, Darlac, Qui Nhon, and Nha Trang—with devastating losses for the enemy. The Americans and ARVN lost 427 dead and 1,524 wounded, but the enemy lost twelve times as many: 5,405 killed and 704 captured, although, as always, that 12:1 kill ratio was almost certainly inflated by the inclusion of civilians on a battlefield where 16,000 homes were flattened by allied artillery and air strikes. In Ban Me Thuot, a lovely town of 65,000 in the Central Highlands, journalist Don Oberdorfer described "a horror of blood, bullets, death, and destruction."[3]

The first shots in I Corps were aimed at Da Nang's sprawling air base on January 29. The communists hit it with forty rocket and mortar rounds, killing and wounding seven, crippling thirteen strike fighters, burning three hangars, and setting a bomb dump on fire.

The following night, the general offensive struck every major town in I Corps, including Hue and Da Nang. Initially, the Americans recorded "GVN [Government of Vietnam] and ARVN paralysis brought on by the shock of the attack and the impression of VC strength." ARVN soldiers of all ranks were alleging a vast conspiracy and refusing to fight. American troops, they said, were deliberately letting the communist attacks roll inward to put pressure on President Thieu to negotiate with Hanoi and the VC to end the war.[4]

In IV Corps, the VC attacked thirteen of the sixteen province and district capitals in the Mekong Delta. They cratered, blocked, or dropped every essential road, waterway, and bridge. The thirty-nine battalions of ARVN infantry that garrisoned the Delta had been reduced to such a weak strength by Tet leaves that the US 9th Infantry Division and American combat support units had to weigh in everywhere. They would have had to weigh in anyway, for the few ARVN who remained in IV Corps proved reluctant to venture out of their bases to confront the unfolding hell of Tet. Five years earlier a plucky American adviser in the Mekong Delta named John Paul Vann had risked his career to detail all of the failings of the ARVN that MACV had tried so sedulously to conceal. Lieutenant Colonel Vann had been forced into retirement for his candor, but clearly none of the problems he had explored in his reports had been solved. "The ARVN remain in static defensive positions," a US adviser complained as the communists rampaged through the Delta. "They do not pursue the VC forces."[5]

The ARVN IV Corps commander, General Nguyen Van Manh, did not ride to the sound of the guns. Instead, he took refuge in his residence in Can Tho, behind a barbed wire fence and heavily manned bunker positions. Taking no chances, he ordered his two Ranger battalions not to fight the VC but to secure his headquarters and house and the streets around them. For two entire weeks, all ARVN ground movement in the Mekong Delta stopped. Revolutionary Development hamlets that had been listed by Bob Komer as "secure" were abandoned to the communists.

The ARVN units assigned to defend those CORDS pacification projects were pulled back to the provincial capitals, along with the RD teams. The ruff-puffs who remained took one look at the encroaching VC and abandoned their outposts with little resistance. The civilian population of the Delta, terrified by the VC attacks, fled the major towns, clogging the already cratered roads with throngs of refugees. The ARVN had made no arrangements for such a crisis. There was no checkpoint or control system, which meant that the enemy could hide among the refugees, gathering intelligence, traveling in their midst, and blocking the movement of reaction forces. The National Police stuck to the cities, not daring to venture onto the roads outside. General Manh's dereliction of duty in IV Corps was so extreme, even by ARVN standards, that MACV forced his removal. Despite commanding three South Vietnamese divisions, five Ranger battalions, and several Marine battalions, General Manh had left the Mekong Delta to its fate. In Saigon, a complicit Thieu awaited the disgraced corps commander and immediately promoted him to the post of inspector general of the army.[6]

MACV had earlier delegated all supply support in IV Corps to the ARVN, as a first step toward handing the entire war over to them. The experiment failed under the stress of Tet, and the Americans had to hurry back in. A US adviser in the Delta remarked that "the chaos here anticipates exactly what will happen during 'Vietnamization.'"[7]

Despite ample warning of Tet, the ARVN and ruff-puffs had been caught unprepared. Though they had canceled cease-fire leaves in I Corps on January 29 and leaves everywhere else on the thirtieth, those measures initially had no effect, for the ARVN had no way to contact troops who had already left for home.

Even President Thieu had ignored urgent appeals from Westmoreland to remain at his post in Saigon and departed for his wife's home at My Tho in the Mekong Delta. ARVN combat battalions everywhere remained at 50 percent of their duty strength throughout the Tet Offensive. In the Delta, none of them had bothered to stockpile ammo or even top up their fuel tanks, which meant that some units couldn't fight at all and others had to ration their fire and movement. They couldn't be resupplied by road or river. The roads were blocked and the canals were under constant attack by the VC. The South Vietnamese forces could hardly even communicate. The VC had cut every one of their phone lines.[8]

Seventy-two ARVN and ruff-puff firebases and garrisons in the Delta were cut off for over fourteen days and had to be resupplied by MACV's already overused air assets, chiefly the 164th Aviation Group, which had been established at Can Tho to backstop the ARVN just two weeks earlier.

Medical care in the Delta also fell to the Americans, most of the Saigon government's medical personnel having run away when the communists attacked, and stayed away. An American captain attached to IV Corps headquarters in Can Tho marveled at the exertions of the American pilots: "The ARVN survived only because of these emergency deliveries." US pilots delivered everything—aviation and motor gas, diesel, lubricants, ammo, rations, and water. They also flew in thousands of ARVN troops who had been stranded on leave, moved maneuver units from place to place, and handled the evacuation of ARVN casualties, which was particularly urgent because the ARVN had not pre-stocked blood or oxygen, and the VNAF helicopters in the Delta refused to fly because of their "restrictive regulations," which were always risk-averse and never more so than during a holiday or a battle.[9]

The commander of II Field Force Vietnam, General Fred Weyand, had felt the storm brewing and, three weeks earlier, had received Westmoreland's permission to move most of his corps back to the Saigon Circle. With twenty-seven US maneuver battalions and six ARVN divisions, Weyand had the combat power to take on the thirty-five VC battalions that launched the Tet assault in III Corps. He was immediately put to the test.[10]

Late on January 30, an armed VC caught at a checkpoint in Saigon divulged that he was on his way to attack Tan Son Nhut Airport. The Capital Military District went on full alert at 10 p.m., warning troops in the city to stop every ARVN vehicle and search it for impostors. At 2:45 a.m. on January 31, a nineteen-man VC sapper platoon blasted a hole in the wall

of the US embassy and crawled inside. They knew exactly where they were going, for two of their number were VC employed by the US State Department inside the embassy. Two MPs guarding the embassy grounds fired on the VC sappers as they wriggled through the hole in the wall, killing the two team leaders, but both MPs were shot in the back by the two VC already inside the compound, men who had quietly worked as embassy drivers before the offensive.[11]

There was only a small group of Marines and MPs defending the embassy when the VC sappers broke in, but they reacted smartly, sealing the embassy building, alerting the rest of the Marine contingent to return to the embassy from their barracks five blocks away, and picking off the VC in the compound one by one.

The VC sappers had forty pounds of C-4 with them—more than enough explosive to blast their way into the chancery building, where a half dozen embassy employees huddled fearfully. But their leaders had been shot and killed coming through the wall. The surviving sappers had been told that they would be reinforced by VC infantry and that crowds of pro-VC, anti-war students would join them on the embassy grounds. None of that support materialized. Instead, the embassy defenders began to strike back. Five Americans were killed in the shoot-out, but their hard-pressed fellows pinned the confused attackers in the embassy gardens long enough for additional MPs and Marines to arrive, as well as a platoon of 101st Airborne troops, who landed on the embassy roof to secure the chancery and grounds. By 9 a.m., Westmoreland and Bunker declared the embassy secure. All nineteen VC were dead, and only one of the American reaction forces was wounded.[12]

But tremendous damage had been done at home in the United States. On the networks, the evening news at 6:30 p.m. on January 30 carried the first reports of the assault in Saigon, where it was 5:30 a.m. the next day. News that the Viet Cong had penetrated the US embassy was reported to a disbelieving public. America had been fighting on the ground since 1965, had over 500,000 troops in-country, had suffered over 20,000 killed, and Westmoreland had just pronounced victory imminent. And yet here were the VC, inside the South Vietnamese capital, inside the walls of the US embassy, and fighting toward Thieu's presidential palace.

On Capitol Hill, even sympathetic senators deplored LBJ's failure to preempt the offensive, and his underestimation of the VC. "You have been saying the situation with the Viet Cong was one of diminishing morale," Senator Robert Byrd confronted the president. "What has happened?"[13]

In Saigon, the invaders made early gains against a defenseless capital. The eleven VC battalions that had infiltrated Saigon before the offensive assembled at their regrouping points and began attacking their objectives—police posts, headquarters, radio transmitters, and government buildings. Skirmishes flared across the city as the VC battalions, fighting in company, platoon, or squad strength, tried to capture key objectives.

ARVN units in Saigon were posted in camp areas on the outskirts and were not supposed to operate in the city's crowded precincts. Saigon's defense was entrusted to the commander of the National Police, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, a Ky crony and an Air Force officer. Loan, who had taken the precaution of defending his own headquarters with a battalion of South Vietnamese Marines, was fortunate that he had, for without them he probably would have been swept up and killed.

In theory, 3,000 National Police were supposed to garrison the capital. There were 200 of them in each of Saigon's nine precincts and 1,000 more at the National Police headquarters. But with most of the police at home with their families, only a third of Saigon's National Police were on duty—fewer than 1,000 for the entire city. For emergencies such as this one, Loan also had three 400-man paramilitary Police Field Force battalions based in Saigon. But these units, well armed and trained, were also gutted by Tet leaves, some of the 400-man battalions having fewer than thirty men on duty when the communists struck. The older cops, who had joined during the French administration, generally skulked out of harm's way. The younger ones did most of the fighting, but not well. They had to be yanked off the line and provided with thirty minutes of "improvised refresher training" in the middle of the battle to familiarize themselves with weapons and tactics.

General Loan, who had built this 100,000-man police empire, had done it in the usual Saigon way—piling up budgets, perks, and influence, with no regard for performance. The cops lacked cars and radios, and their "reserves" turned out to be clerical workers, most of whom were on leave

or had fled. Loan ordered all officers up to the age of thirty-five to combat duty on February 7. Two days later, he ordered all men up to age forty-five to join the fighting, with no noticeable effect. The cops who turned up were exhausted and hungry. Unlike the army, they were not given rations. With the markets closed and combat raging, Saigon's policemen were observed knocking on doors to beg for food and water.[14]

General Loan committed one of the only acts of police daring in the first days, shooting a handcuffed VC prisoner in the head in front of NBC's television cameras, an exploit that stunned American viewers, who had supposed that the Saigon regime was more lawful than the communists.

Loan's televised execution of a prisoner may have been, as *New York Times* reporter Tom Buckley put it, "the turning point—the moment when the American public turned against the war." Eddie Adams' photo of the murder, showing the agonized face of the VC captive at the instant when Loan pulled the trigger, found its way onto the cover of the next *Newsweek*, and leered accusingly from America's newsstands, coffee tables, and waiting rooms.[15]

In Saigon, VC attacks on the presidential palace, broadcast facilities, and the Joint General Staff headquarters were all repulsed. The lightly armed Viet Cong struggled to make a dent in weak defenses that, thanks to American mobility, were swiftly reinforced. VC documents captured in the battle revealed deep frustration with the communist failure to stop American air and overland reinforcement of the capital, as well as the absence of spontaneous popular support from the inhabitants of Saigon. "VC/NVA elements failed to motivate the local populace," one report read. It concluded that the early gains could not be consolidated "because there were not enough replacements from locals" to replace VC casualties in the offensive.[16]

The communist attacks spanned the entire Saigon Circle: Saigon, Tan Son Nhut Airport, Bien Hoa Airbase, and Long Binh Post, which was the headquarters of II Field Force and the seat of the Army's 1st Aviation Brigade. Long Binh was the prize. Everything was there: signals, engineers, two evacuation hospitals, the biggest supply dump in the country, and over 40 percent of American helicopters in Vietnam. In Saigon, where there were no US combat troops besides the Marines guarding the US embassy, three VC local-force battalions breached the wire at Tan Son Nhut, the headquarters of the VNAF and the US 7th Air Force, and nearly seized the two 10,000-foot concrete runways as well as Westmoreland's headquarters in the neighboring MACV compound.

Westmoreland was stunned by the speed with which the recently opened "Pentagon East" was encircled and attacked. He and his staff descended to the command bunker for a last stand, pausing only to transfer Westy's authority to US Army headquarters in Long Binh, in case MACV was overrun. The enemy was held just short of its objectives by US Air Force reaction forces and two ARVN companies and then, after three hours of combat, was defeated by a squadron of the US 4th Cavalry Regiment, which rolled in at 6 a.m. from its camp northwest of Saigon to hit the VC in the rear with tanks.[17]

VC mortars cratered the runway at Bien Hoa at 2:48 a.m. on January 31, preventing any jets from taking off. The VC 274th and 275th Regiments then stormed the air base, getting into the bunker line and nearly breaking through the perimeter. The air base was saved by the arrival at 9 a.m. of a battalion of the 101st Airborne Division and a troop of armored cavalry from the 9th ID, but also by the heroics of its Army gunships, which, as everywhere, were on "strip alert" and got aloft in thirty seconds or less.

Sixty-eight gunships, grouped in "light fire teams," were all the air cover available in the Saigon Circle until about 1 p.m., when the first fighter jet was able to take off from the hastily repaired runway at Bien Hoa. The gunships swarmed over Saigon, Bien Hoa, and Long Binh, attacking enemy mortar and rocket sites, following the river lines and destroying 520 sampans used to ferry enemy troops and ammo, and then mowing down nearly 2,000 men of the two VC regiments. In 18,000 sorties, the restless gunships fired over 100,000 rocket and artillery rounds and 6.4 million rounds of machine gun ammo. The VC attackers, who had closed so eagerly on the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex, were torn to shreds.[18]

The communist plan had been for local forces to infiltrate the cities and to be quickly reinforced by inflowing waves of main-force units, who would exploit the prevailing chaos to move into the cities. In Saigon, the plan was foiled by the fast reaction of the US 101st Airborne Division, which clung to the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex, and by the US 1st Infantry Division, which repulsed a VC attack on their base camp and then made heavy contact with the VC 273rd Regiment at Phu Cuong City, the provincial capital, which lay just east of them.

Phu Cuong was the sort of critical junction the communists needed to take and hold in order to reinforce the combat in Saigon. A river and three highways converged there, but the Americans caught the VC on the move and killed nearly 400 of them. The fighting was confused, the initial VC boldness replaced by caution as the Americans scrambled "lightships" with searchlights to illuminate the VC companies and then target them with air strikes and artillery.

The VC, stunned by the speed of the American reaction, backed into the surrounding hamlets to shelter among the inhabitants and buy time while the Big Red One sought "political and provincial clearance" to fire into the village of An My, on the northwestern edge of Phu Loi Base Camp. The clearance was given, and the Americans obliterated the village and its hamlets under 5,000 rounds of field artillery and air strikes with cluster bomblets and 500-pound bombs. Picking through the wreckage on February 1, the grunts of the 1st ID would find another 197 corpses of the VC 273rd Regiment.[19]

Brutal counterattacks like these stopped the VC main-force units short of Saigon, depriving the infiltrators in the capital of crucial reinforcements. The US 25th Infantry Division did the same to the VC 271st and 272nd Regiments, halting their drive on the capital. The tanks and APCs of the US 4th Cavalry Regiment that saved Tan Son Nhut Airport at 6 a.m. on February 1 traveled on Route 1, which the VC were supposed to have cut, and across bridges that the VC were supposed to have dropped. VC troops missed their assignments there, and also on Route 13, where another American armored battalion at Loc Ninh was able to race right past a VC division on the outskirts of Saigon to relieve the ARVN III Corps headquarters. "The communists were snared by their own strategy," Weyand's ops chief observed. "They needed local forces to cut the key roads and bridges, but they sent those local forces into the urban fighting and left non-local NVA and other units who didn't know the area to cut the roads."[20]

Because of these prompt and effective American counterattacks, the VC and NVA units in the Saigon Circle could not reinforce the sputtering attacks inside the capital. On the contrary, they were themselves destroyed. Scheduled to enter Saigon in the days after February 2, they instead found themselves trapped between their base areas and Saigon—*easy meat for* American airpower and artillery. "They took a terrific pasting," *General Weyand's headquarters* reported. In the first week of February, Weyand estimated that his troops killed and captured 8,500 communists in the Saigon Circle. The victory hadn't been cheap—1,000 allied forces died in the same period—but it was lopsided.[21]

By midnight on January 31, Weyand had brought more maneuver battalions into Saigon than the communists had managed to infiltrate. The VC who *had* infiltrated could now be contained, run to ground, and killed. Most of the VC prisoners captured in Saigon came from central Vietnam. This fact suggested that the VC had far fewer Saigon adherents than they claimed, and was another explanation for the poor performance of the VC in the capital. They did not know the city and became utterly lost when separated from their guides. Even the guides got lost, failing in many cases to find street addresses where weapons and ammo were cached.[22]

All of Le Duan's optimistic assumptions about the Tet Offensive proved false. All of Defense Minister Giap's caution, which had led to his exile, proved warranted. The ARVN and ruff-puffs did *not* crumble under the onslaught of 84,000 communist troops, and the Americans did *not* retreat. With many of its battalions down to just 200 men because of Tet leaves, the ARVN stumbled early but then pulled itself together. Still, Weyand found his South Vietnamese ally far from effective. They didn't collapse tactically, but they did allow themselves to be pushed out of many areas, at which point they displayed the "perennial ARVN problem of counter-attacking," which was to say, *not* counterattacking, until the Americans showed up.[23]

The longest battle of the Tet Offensive flared through Hue in I Corps, where the fighting dragged on for three weeks. Hue exerted a special fascination for the North Vietnamese. Sited far to the north on Route 1, it sat halfway between the 16th and 17th parallels and was vulnerable to a communist land grab because of its nearness to the DMZ. It also had special significance to the South Vietnamese. It was a cradle of their country, its imperial palace the ancient seat of the Vietnamese emperors. The Viet Minh had tried to destroy the palace in 1945 "to sever Vietnam from its past," but the French had renovated and expanded it to give their puppet emperor a more imposing court and to accent traditional values of family loyalty and ancestor worship that the Viet Minh had tried to eradicate.

The three-week battle for Hue proved a couple of things. First, like the fighting around Saigon, it proved the truth of Bernard Fall's observation

that for the United States the war was, "in the short run, militarily 'unlosable'" owing to "the immense influx of American manpower and firepower." By no means had the now deceased Frenchman believed that it was winnable, just that it was "unlosable," in the sense that neither the NVA nor the VC had answers for American maneuverability, command of the air, and firepower. The communists lacked even a basic capability to sustain large-scale attacks. The US 1st Infantry Division made the same point after chewing up two VC main-force regiments that had attacked their base camp and attempted to drive on Saigon: "The enemy's problem is how to carry out his intentions based on *capability*." This gulf in capabilities between American and communist forces was too wide to bridge.[24]

The bitter combat in Hue also proved that the war, pitched by Westmoreland as nearing its end, was far from over. The tenacity of the communist fighters in Hue foreshadowed a conflict that would go on and on, beyond the "short run" favored by Americans, into a "long run" that, for the Americans, *would* be militarily losable. The White House struggled to understand how the situation could have flipped so quickly. "I have a question," Secretary of State Dean Rusk asked the Joint Chiefs at a meeting in the Cabinet Room during the battle. "In the past, we have said the problem really was finding the enemy. Now the enemy has come to us. I am sure many will ask why aren't we doing better now that we know where they are."[25]

For a man who had been congratulating himself on preventing the communist "scissors" from slicing across the country to the seacoast and its important cities of Hue and Da Nang, Westmoreland failed in Hue, as elsewhere, to prevent 6,000 NVA regulars from filtering through I Corps, infiltrating the city, and launching a reign of terror there. Don Oberdorfer, a Korean War vet who reported from Hue for the *Washington Post*, put this failure down to the usual mix of sloth and aloofness that characterized American and South Vietnamese cooperation.

Hue's police chief, a former sportscaster who sipped Johnnie Walker Black Label throughout the workday, did not send whatever intelligence he gleaned to the city's ARVN 1st Division, nor did the small CIA office in Hue communicate with the US military advisory team there. Radio intercepts of the NVA advance on Hue picked up by the US field station at Phu Bai, just eight miles south of Hue, were sent not to the city's defenders but to Da Nang for "analysis," where they languished.[26]

At 2:00 a.m. on January 31, three battalions of the NVA 6th Regiment and several VC units crossed the Perfume River in two places, attacked the Imperial Citadel at Hue, penetrated the forbidden city (that "nest of mandarins and monarchs"), and raised the yellow-starred flag of the Viet Cong over the Citadel. In the New City on the southern bank of the Perfume River, where most of Hue's 140,000 people lived, the NVA 4th Regiment assembled after picking its way through the rural districts around the city. They struck toward the MACV compound.

Long off-limits to US combat forces for political reasons, Hue nearly fell to this communist swipe. But a single company of General Ngo Quang Truong's ARVN 1st Division held fast in the division headquarters in the northeast corner of the Citadel. The general was reinforced that evening by his 3rd Regiment and three ARVN Airborne battalions. South of the city, small parties of Americans fought to slow the communist infiltration of South Vietnam's third-largest city, secure the MACV compound, and clear the south bank of the river.

After the initial onslaught, the communists held most of Hue except for tiny enclaves—the ARVN 1st Division headquarters inside the Citadel, the MACV headquarters in the New City on the south bank, and, most critically, the "LCU ramp." The ramp was Hue's south-bank river port, the place where troops, supplies, and ammo were shipped by sea from Da Nang and then up the Perfume River to Hue in LCUs (landing craft utility). Purely by chance, a platoon of four tanks and two self-propelled guns destined for Quang Tri City had just landed at the port when the attack began, providing the allied reaction forces with critical armored support.[27]

The battle would play out in three distinct areas: the Citadel, the New City, and the country surrounding Hue, an area of low hills, old imperial tombs, scrubby brush, and rice paddies. The NVA would have to hold this ground if they wanted to remain in Hue. Removing them from it was a key to saving the city. The Marines would focus on defending their own main supply route, which was the LCU ramp as well as Route 1, which ran right past the front gate of the beleaguered MACV compound. The ARVN 1st Division successfully retook the Citadel's airfield on February 1, allowing them to fly in reinforcements.

More ARVN reinforcements arrived by road that same day. Two ARVN Airborne battalions and a troop of twelve APCs shot their way into the

Citadel on February 1, losing 130 killed and wounded, many of them in four APCs that were pierced by NVA antitank guns. On February 2, the US 1st Cavalry Division began sending companies of its 3rd Brigade to take up positions north and west of Hue to prevent the communists from reinforcing the two NVA regiments, the sapper and rocket battalions, and the six local-force companies known to be inside the city.[28]

Hue's Citadel sprawled along the north bank of the Perfume River and enclosed a square mile of palace buildings erected over the years by the Vietnamese emperors. This was the old or forbidden city of Hue, shielded from the eyes of commoners by two stone walls, three feet thick and fifteen feet high, and a moat, fed by the river, that surrounded most of the Citadel. Between the outer and inner walls of the Citadel was a town of narrow lanes, heavy stone houses and buildings, high walls, and hedgerows. The residents of Hue had fortified their homes, with bunkers beneath them, broken glass cemented on the tops of the walls, and barbed wire laced through the hedges to deter assailants. Every home inside the old city was a defensive position. In southern Hue, the New City, the streets were wider and the houses easier to breach. Here there would be more room to maneuver.[29]

To take back the vital space around Hue and strangle the communists inside, the 3rd Brigade of the Cav and a battalion of the 101st Airborne Division air-assaulted into positions north and west of Hue on February 2 to attack the three additional NVA regiments and the 3,000 local forces who were holding a corridor into Hue and supporting the two NVA regiments already inside the city.

NVA battalions were trying to hold a ring around the city and move reinforcements into it by creeping unseen down the canals that surrounded the Citadel. In this they were aided by heavy rains and fog, which made American artillery, air strikes, and the 8-inch guns of Navy cruisers in the Gulf of Tonkin harder to target. The Citadel's western wall was the vital link. Everything the communists consumed—troops, ammo, medicine, and rations—flowed through it. US forces, checked by foul weather, low ceilings, and visibility of 500 feet or less, fought to close that route. For ten miserable days, four American battalions pressed down from the northwest toward that wall, the NVA defending their key supply lines—Route 554 and the Perfume River itself—with mortars, machine guns, RPGs, and 122 mm rockets.[30]

MACV documents spoke of "the weather greatly limiting supporting fires," but those fires were still prodigious: 7,700 rounds of 8-inch shell, 53,000 rounds of 105 mm artillery, and 200 tons of aerial bombs and napalm. By February 22, the Cav and Airborne had closed to within a mile of the wall. Two days later, they reached the wall itself. Sixty-eight Americans had been killed and 453 wounded in the effort to cut this main supply line and chew up the battalions defending it. In the course of their advance, they counted 400 enemy dead in collapsed bunkers and trenches. The NVA units, MACV noted, were secure only "when they walked through jungles, and avoided the population." That advantage disappeared everywhere they deployed in Tet, especially in Hue. "As soon as he moved, we did also," MACV observed.[31]

Undeterred by the ARVN, which lacked heavy direct-fire weapons to blast the communists out of their hardened positions, the two NVA regiments inside Hue embarked on a bloody purge of what the VC called "the enemy's restrictive administrative machinery." The political cadres embedded in the combat units had lists and photos of South Vietnamese citizens to be "eliminated" and were given more names by some of the students, teachers, and Buddhist monks who welcomed the invaders. To make the purge more palatable, the communists stood up a "Coalition Front for Peace." This was the usual communist front organization that was entirely supine: two Viet Cong, a Buddhist monk, a professor, and sixty-year-old Mrs. Luan Chi.[32]

The purges were carried out inside Hue but also in its outer districts, the "kill lists" vetted by NVA and VC officers. In just two of the outer districts, the communists killed over 2,000 "puppet authorities," who were legislators, policemen, army officers on leave, hamlet and village chiefs, civil servants, clergy, professionals, or just merchants or landowners indicted as "tyrants, reactionaries, and spies." The corpses of two Benedictine priests from France were found, one bound hand and foot and buried alive, the other shot in the back of the head.

The NVA, guided by their "coalition front" in Hue and by snitches in the occupied outlying districts, killed about 6,000 South Vietnamese citizens. The victims of the communist purge were later discovered in mass graves on both banks of the Perfume River. Many had been shot; others had been clubbed to death or buried alive. During and after the atrocity, the

communists were unrepentant: "The entire control machinery of the feu-dalists and bourgeois was centered in Hue," they alleged. The proletariat had risen up to kill its masters, they lied. "Hatred and vengeance prevailed everywhere, in the hearts of children and old people alike."[33]

For the first several days, Hue's defenders were handcuffed by rules of engagement that banned "supporting fires" in a city that was notorious for its culture of political resistance to Saigon. "The invaders," a witness reported, "were all over the area, walking back and forth through the streets with leafy camouflage hanging from their shoulder packs, carrying mor-tar tubes and projectiles, machine guns, and other weapons." They seemed untroubled by thoughts of a counterattack. The restrictions were finally removed on February 3, when two US Marine battalions, which had been rushed up from Phu Bai as a reaction force on January 31, began fighting house-to-house to take back the New City.[34]

Michael Herr, who was there for *Esquire*, recalled the drive into Hue from Phu Bai in an eight-truck convoy, refugees lining the sides of the road: "All the grunts were whistling, and no two were whistling the same tune; it sounded like a locker room before a game that nobody wanted to play." The fighting in the New City sloshed back and forth, Marine bat-talions measuring their AOs not in square miles but in city blocks. They learned urban warfare quickly, avoiding the streets and closing on the enemy by blasting through the walls of houses until they arrived inside the enemy strongpoints. They took and held the Hue University campus. Based there, they undertook six major assaults on enemy troops in the Treasury and Post Office buildings. Half of the New City was reduced to rubble.[35]

The US determination to recover Hue reflected high-level meetings in Washington, where administration officials worried that the NVA needed only *one* major city. If they held Hue, they could call it the "first liberated zone" and the "true capital" of South Vietnam. It would become a magnet for antiwar South Vietnamese "coalitionists." Clark Clifford urged Johnson to drop bombs into the "restricted areas" around Hanoi and the Chinese border to make clear that the United States would not be pushed around in this way. Hanoi was not taking up the president's peace feelers, Clifford argued, so Johnson should hit them *harder*. But Johnson squirmed away from the decision. Too many planes and pilots would be lost to the North Vietnamese air defenses, LBJ countered. "Bob McNamara says the loss is not worth the gain."

General Earle "Bus" Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, urged the president to "stop applying rigid restrictions to ourselves" and to coun-terpunch brutally before it was too late. On February 8, Wheeler wrote Westmoreland: "There is a theory that overall enemy strategy is to attack and attrite the ARVN and thereby destroy them and ultimately gain accep-tance by the people of a coalition government that would request the with-drawal of U.S. forces in South Vietnam." In meetings with the president, Bus Wheeler spoke not of theory but of fact. Reinforcements were urgently needed to "contain the enemy offensive" in I Corps.[36]

On February 12, the 1st Battalion of the 5th US Marine Regiment and two South Vietnamese Marine battalions relieved the ARVN Airborne troops inside the Citadel. Using the critical LCU ramp, the Marines brought in five M-48 tanks and four M-50 Ontos tank destroyers, the latter a lightly armored tracked vehicle mounting six 106 mm recoilless rifles. The two South Vietnamese Marine battalions arrived with five 105 mm howitzers,

Men of the 5th Marine Regiment during the combat in Hue City. Inside the Citadel, the Marines lost one killed or wounded for every yard gained. (National Archives)

which finally gave them the firepower to dislodge the small, scattered enemy detachments that were holding up whole companies of ARVN infantry.[37]

The fighting inside the Citadel intensified. The troops fought house-to-house, the US forces suffering one killed or wounded for every yard gained. The US Marines were held up inside the northeast wall of the Citadel, their advance checked by enemy fire from the palace grounds on their right flank, which, for "political and cultural" reasons, they were forbidden to suppress.

Here and there shivering refugees would appear from a cellar or through a gap in a wall to try to reach their abandoned homes. The Marines would shoo them away: "Di, di, *di*, you sorry-ass motherfuckers, go on, get the hell away from here!" The refugees would smile, bow or shrug, and dash up the ruined streets. Three companies of the 1st Battalion of the 5th Marines were reduced to below platoon strength. By now, Michael Herr observed, "everyone wanted to get wounded," just to get out alive. On February 16, radio intercepts revealed that the NVA officer commanding the force inside the Citadel had been killed by artillery. His deputy commander requested permission to withdraw, as the soldiers could no longer be supplied. American artillery, air, and naval fires were making all movement through the western wall impossible. His request was denied, and he was ordered to "defend in place"—to the last man.[38]

On that same day, scenting victory, Vice President Ky, Prime Minister Nguyen Van Loc, ARVN I Corps commander General Hoang Xuan Lam, and a dozen other South Vietnamese grandees flew to MACV's Forward HQ in I Corps to show themselves to a gaggle of reporters before being briefed on the recapture of the Imperial City. Westy's deputy, Creighton Abrams, was there, along with the Marine commander Robert Cushman. They briefed Ky and the others on the fighting, and spoke of the "cultural" constraints posed by an enemy fighting from pagodas, palaces, churches, schools, and hospitals. By now, 150 of the 160 historic structures inside the Hue Citadel were smoking ruins. Ky, who had declared war on Hue two years earlier when its garrison commander had challenged his rule, assured the gathered generals that they were free to raze everything that remained standing: "I will take responsibility for damage or destruction if necessary to drive the enemy from the city."[39]

On February 21, the ARVN 1st Division was finally relieved by the Cav, which broke through enemy positions on the western and northern faces of the Citadel. The communists by now had been pressed into the southeastern corner of the Citadel. All hope of resupply and reinforcement was ended. The 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division had deployed on the southern outskirts of Hue to close those routes, and the Cav had stopped all movement in and out of Hue from the north and west.

None of it had been easy. Those Army units took two-thirds as many casualties in five days as the Marines had suffered in three weeks. On February 23, a battalion of the ARVN 1st Division as well as the division's crack reaction force—known as the Black Panther or Hac Bao Company—seized the flag tower on the southern wall of the Citadel. They fired 300 rounds of 105 mm artillery into the wall to kill the defenders there before fighting their way up the steps of the flag tower, the surviving NVA retreating before them, triggering claymore mines and defending barricades to the last man.[40]

Early on February 24, ARVN troops tore down the fifty-foot-wide VC flag that had fluttered over the Citadel for more than three weeks. They raised the red-striped yellow flag of South Vietnam in its place. President Thieu, a former ARVN 1st Division commander, arrived the next day to congratulate the division's current commander, General Ngo Quang Truong, on his successful defense of the city. Mopping up communist stragglers would continue for another week, but Operation Hue City was effectively over. The battle ended on March 2, with 70 percent of the city destroyed or badly damaged. Enemy casualties were estimated at 5,000 killed and 100 captured. The ARVN and South Vietnamese Marines lost 384 killed and 1,830 wounded. The US Marines lost 142 killed and 857 wounded, the Army 74 killed and 507 wounded. Both sides were chastened by the result here and elsewhere. Le Duan's general offensive had shattered against superior allied mobility and firepower, failing to ignite a general uprising, or any uprising at all. But the American and South Vietnamese success had to be netted against the tremendous damage done to South Vietnam, high casualties, a collapse of the pacification program, and the psychological blow of the offensive to American hopes and plans.[41]

Chapter 14

"WE CAN KEEP ON WINNING THE WAR FOREVER"

The Tet Offensive ripped visible gashes all across South Vietnam. It did equal, less visible harm to the South Vietnamese government. General Le Nguyen Khang, the III Corps commander and a Ky protégé, told the CIA in February 1968 that Thieu had shown himself to be a weak and uninspiring leader, and that Ky was no better. Still, Khang added, there was no appetite for a coup among senior military officers. No one wanted responsibility for the mess in South Vietnam. The only thing all of the generals could agree on was that, like Thieu and Ky, they would never permit the VC to join a South Vietnamese coalition government. Above all, the generals were survivors, and they knew that they would not retain their posts under a power-sharing deal with the communists. France's puppet emperor Bao Dai had tried that twenty-three years earlier, and he had lasted only five months on the throne before being brushed aside by his Viet Minh coalition partners. "I have no solution to the leadership problem," Khang confided to the CIA, "and I doubt anyone else has one."[1]

With so much defeatism swirling around him, Westmoreland could see that his war in Vietnam was running out of time and gas. President Johnson froze in panic, woodenly insisting that, although critics

abounded, "our military and diplomatic men in the field know more than any of our congressmen and senators back here." And yet when the military men wanted to start bombing Hanoi and Haiphong to punish Hanoi's aggression and war crimes inside South Vietnam, Johnson authorized just fourteen targets, hardly enough to sway the politburo.

On February 18, 1968, the president flew to California to appear on the flight deck of the carrier *Constellation* to address the crew before they sailed for Vietnam. LBJ dripped fear and indecision. He asked for questions, and none were asked, so he called on the gathered sailors. "If you were president," he asked one, "what would *you* do to change things?" "Hit them more," the young man replied. Johnson then launched into a tortured explanation as to why he couldn't. It was impossible, he insisted, to close all of their roads and sea lanes. And the Russians and Chinese might intervene if he did: "The whole family might jump on us."[2]

LBJ was trying to kick the war away to reduce its impact on his reelection chances. That was more difficult now than earlier, for the press corps in Saigon had nearly doubled in size during Tet. There had been 350 reporters in Saigon when the offensive began. There were now 650. With the media filled with news of Tet and its casualties, the president's approval rating sank to 32 percent.

LBJ's meetings in February and March 1968 rang with indignant denunciations of the press and Bill Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "People have the view that we took a great defeat," the president grumbled. "*Our* version is not being put to the American people properly." Yet MACV's lawyerly assertion that Tet had resulted in "favorable operational statistics for the quarter" charmed no one.

Clark Clifford, who was poised to replace McNamara as secretary of defense, pointed to the contradiction in the Army's position: "On the one hand the military has said we had quite a victory out there last week. On the other hand, they now say that it was such a big victory that we need 120,000 *more* men." This was a reference to Westmoreland's plea for reinforcements during the Tet Offensive.

McGeorge Bundy, once an ardent booster of the war, had fled the administration. McNamara, voice of so much rah-rah optimism, was in his last, thoroughly dispirited month on the job. President Johnson, abandoned by his most trusted hawks, was stricken with fear and doubt. The CIA director, Dick Helms, told him that the best that could be expected from the great bloodletting of Tet was more stagnation, "neither side capable of registering decisive gains." For the moment, LBJ held the line against Westmoreland's call for more troops. There would be "no great new overall moves" in the war, the president assured a press conference. The manpower ceiling would be kept at 525,000. Up for reelection in nine months, the president dared not raise it again.[3]

But Westmoreland wanted to counterpunch. He wrote directly to LBJ on February 12. The heavy communist casualties, Westy argued, "afforded near and long-term opportunities" to pursue and destroy the wounded enemy. Until now, the United States had waged "a limited war with limited objectives, fought with limited means, programmed for the utilization of limited resources." It was time to go all in to win with "a bold offensive campaign."[4]

Westmoreland had inflicted enormous casualties on the enemy during Tet and now wanted to implement the new strategy he had floated during the summer of 1967. He told the president the bold outlines—"the enemy has changed his strategy, we must change ours"—but he kept the rather alarming details to himself and the Joint Chiefs. Westy wanted to increase troop levels and take the offensive north across the DMZ and west into the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail and isolate the South Vietnamese battlefield.

Three weeks before Tet, Westmoreland had ordered his staff to work up Operation El Paso. El Paso would harden Route 9 across I Corps, through Khe Sanh, and into the Laotian road and trail junction of Xepon. With that line of supply complete and secured by US Marines, Westy planned to strike to Xepon with the Cav, the 101st Airborne Division, and the ARVN Airborne Division to seize that "critical choke point" before retiring down the Ho Chi Minh trail to Kontum City in the Central Highlands, destroying enemy troops and supply caches as he went.[5]

Westmoreland planned to pair El Paso with Operation Pacific Grove, an amphibious feint with Okinawa-based Marines toward the North Vietnamese city of Vinh. He assumed that the feint toward Vinh, 150 miles north of the DMZ, would pin down North Vietnamese reserve forces and make it safer for the Cav and Airborne to operate in Laos. For these operations, he renewed his plea for 206,000 additional troops, which would have breached